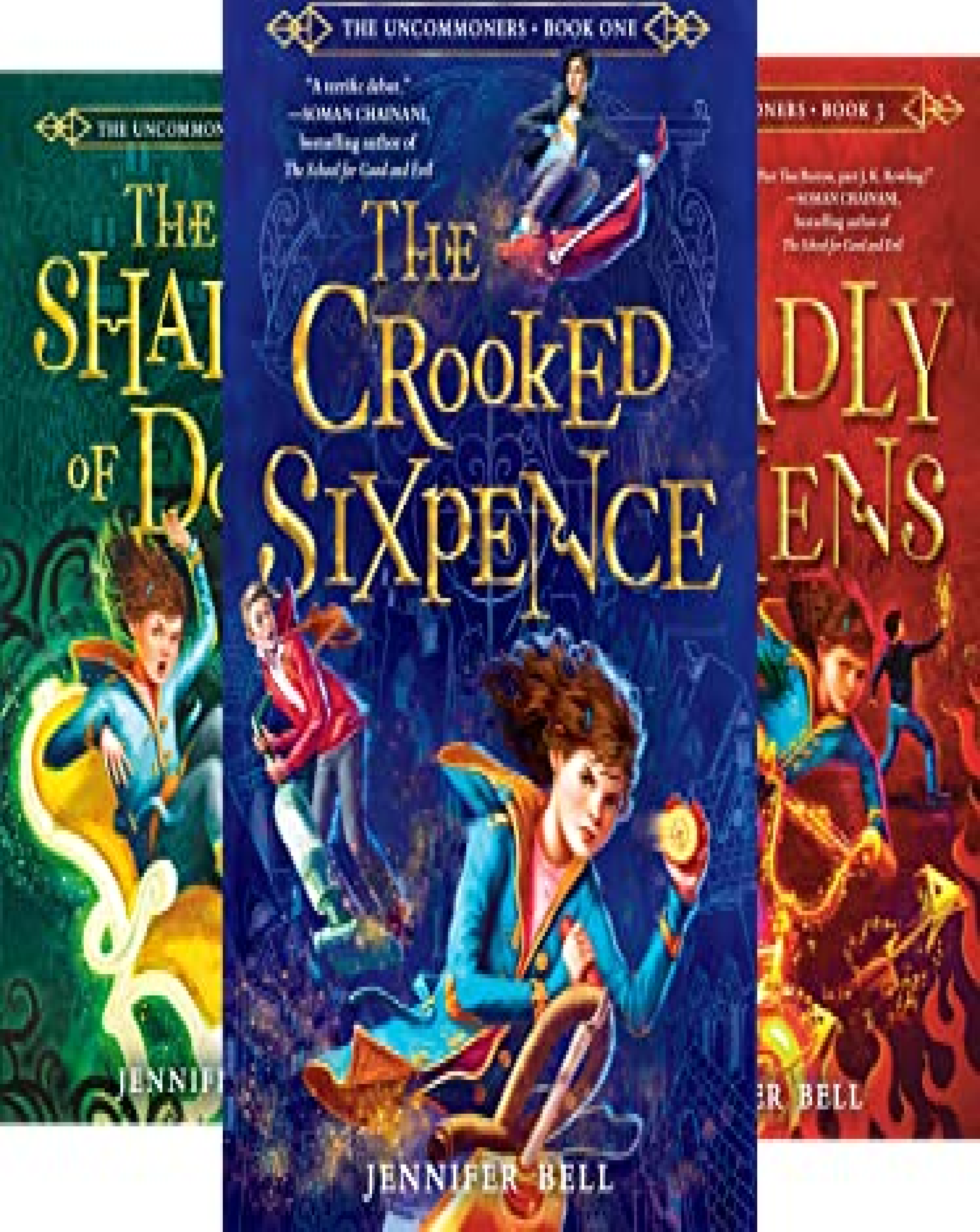

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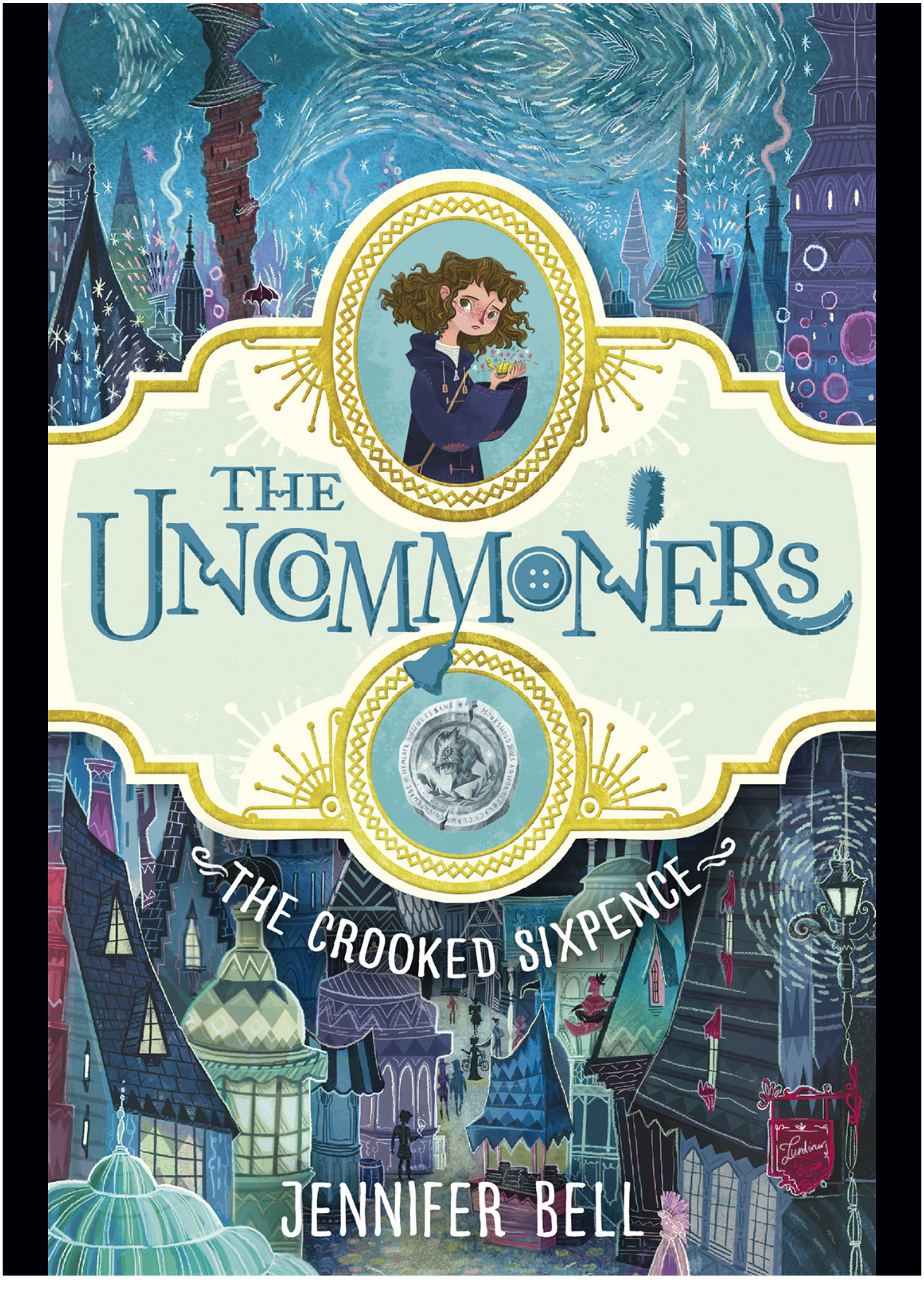

THE UNCOMMONERS

THE CROOKED SIXPENCE

JENNIFER BELL

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About the Book

WELCOME TO A WORLD WHERE NOTHING IS QUITE AS IT SEEMS . . .

A silver bell will tell you the way.
A candle's wick will hide you.
And a crooked sixpence will be the first warning:
Time is running out.

Ivy and Seb Sparrow stumble across something *uncommon* when they see a feather scratch an ominous message on their granma's kitchen wall. Soon, they are lost in the extraordinary world of Lundinor, where ordinary objects have amazing powers.

But where there is power, evil often lurks, and Ivy and Seb must go to the bottom of a family secret . . . before it's too late.

THE UNCOMMONERS

THE CROOKED SIXPENCE

JENNIFER BELL

RHCP DIGITAL

For Mum and Beth,
the heroines of my story.

Chapter One

Ivy rocked forward as the ambulance turned a corner. Everything inside rattled.

‘OK then,’ the paramedic said, looking up from his clipboard. He was a bald man with faded tattoos all the way up his forearms. ‘What’s your full name?’

‘Ivy Elizabeth Sparrow,’ she fired off, tapping her yellow wellingtons on the floor. It was so stuffy; she needed fresh air. She looked over the paramedic’s shoulder and wondered if she could ask him to open one of those blacked-out windows. She could see her frizzy brown curls bobbing in the glass, even more out of control than usual.

The paramedic made a note with his biro and turned towards the rear of the vehicle. ‘What about you?’

At the other end of the bench, leaning forward, legs apart, sat a boy in a grey hoodie bearing the band logo of The Ripz. His wiry blond hair had fallen in front of his eyes but Ivy knew he was glaring at her.

‘It’s Seb,’ the boy replied drily. ‘I’m her brother.’

The paramedic smiled as he jotted down the name. Ivy tried to push Seb out of her mind. This was all his fault.

She leaned over to the stretcher and took Granma Sylvie’s hand. It felt softer than usual. There were Velcro straps across her granma’s chest, a brace supporting her neck and a misted oxygen mask covering her nose and mouth. Ivy had never seen her look so fragile before.

‘And how old are you both?’ the paramedic continued.

‘Eleven,’ Ivy replied, shuffling ever so slightly closer to Granma Sylvie.

‘I’m sixteen,’ Seb said in a deep voice.

Ivy frowned and glanced sideways at him. He had only turned fourteen last month.

‘OK, good.’ The paramedic’s face softened. ‘Now, I understand that you’re both very concerned at the moment – but trust me, the best thing you can do to help your gran is to stay calm. When we get to the hospital, we'll take her into casualty so the doctor can have a good look at her, and then she may need an operation, so she'll be in for a while.'

Ivy grimaced. She knew of only one other occasion when Granma Sylvie had stayed overnight in hospital – everyone knew about *that* – but it had happened before Ivy's parents were even born. 'Do you know what's wrong?' she asked.

The paramedic frowned. 'I think she may have broken her hip, and possibly her wrist as well, but we won't know till we see an X-ray.'

While he scribbled down some notes, Ivy stroked Granma Sylvie's hand and wondered if she'd suffered broken bones *that* time as well. Probably. She'd had a car crash during a freak snowstorm and had been unconscious for days; when she woke up, she couldn't remember what had happened during the accident, or anything before it. The police only knew her name because she was wearing a necklace with SYLVIE engraved on it. Retrograde amnesia, Ivy's mum called it. Ivy knew the exact date of the crash because the family discussed it so often: 5 January 1969. Twelfth Night.

'Before we get to the hospital,' the paramedic said, 'I need to confirm what happened.' He checked his watch. 'I make it eight thirty a.m., so the fall must have happened at about seven forty-five? And you said that your gran slipped in the kitchen while you were both in the other room . . . ?'

Ivy imagined Granma Sylvie losing her balance and tumbling onto her back, legs in the air like an upturned beetle. If only she'd been there to help.

Seb swallowed. 'She was baking mince pies. We heard her shouting.'

Over our shouting, Ivy remembered. She shot her brother a look of regret. They had been arguing about the stupid new Ripz poster he'd got for Christmas – Ivy had accidentally knocked her orange juice over it; if he hadn't been ranting at her, they might have got to Granma Sylvie sooner.

The paramedic flipped his paper round. 'OK, that'll do. Are you able to get hold of your mum and dad?'

Ivy sighed. *If only*. More than anything, she wished her parents were there now.

'I've texted them but there's been no reply,' Seb said. 'I'll try calling when we get to the hospital. Mum's working, but we might catch her before she starts her shift.'

Ivy had said goodbye to her mum yesterday morning. If she was there now, she would have clapped her hands together and taken charge of this whole mess in an instant. Ivy and Seb had done nothing except ring the ambulance.

'Our dad's in Paris,' Ivy added in a quiet voice. 'He's working too.'

Their dad was a consultant for the famous Victoria & Albert Museum in London, which meant that he was an expert in everything old, and people from around the world were always asking for his advice.

The paramedic raised his eyebrows. 'So that's why you're staying with your gran?'

'Mum and Dad were with us over Christmas,' Ivy explained, feeling the need to defend them. 'They just had to go back to work early.'

It had never really bothered her – them staying in London and leaving her and Seb six hours away in Bletchy Scrubb with their granma – but then this kind of emergency had never happened at the same time before.

The paramedic put down his clipboard and turned to Granma Sylvie, who, despite the neck brace, made an effort to smile. Ivy doubted she could even hear what was being said with that thing on; she hadn't corrected the paramedic about Seb's age.

'OK then, Mrs Sparrow, I'm just going to check how you're doing.' He untucked Granma Sylvie's blanket and rolled it away until her arm was exposed. There was a thin cotton sling around it, secured behind her neck. Delicately he loosened the knot and slid the material out from underneath. Granma Sylvie winced.

As the sling was taken away, Ivy caught her breath. Her granma's entire arm was purple and bloated like a giant aubergine.

The paramedic took the damaged wrist carefully between his fingers. 'Hmm, looks like that swelling is getting worse. It must be sore.' He studied it from every angle. Ivy caught a flash of gold on her granma's skin. 'I don't see any clasp on your bracelet. I think we might need to cut it off to make you feel more comfortable, Mrs Sparrow. Is that OK?'

Ivy's chest tightened; she imagined Granma Sylvie's was probably doing the same. That solid gold bangle was one of the few items that remained of her granma's life before her amnesia. She had been wearing it at the time of the accident and Ivy couldn't remember her ever taking it off. The bracelet was special to her, everyone knew that.

Granma Sylvie squeezed her eyes closed. Ivy heard a rasping, 'Do it.'

The paramedic found a pair of small silver pliers. Ivy shivered as two soft *snickts* pierced the air and the two halves of the bangle fell away.

'Ivy, my bag . . .' Granma Sylvie lifted her other hand, pointing shakily.

Ivy reached down for the handbag and held it open. Very carefully, the paramedic placed both pieces of the bangle inside.

'Will you look after it for me?' Granma Sylvie asked.

Ivy nodded, forcing a smile, and opened the bag to check that the bracelet was safely in the inside pocket.

'Be careful,' the paramedic warned, 'the ends are sharp.'

Ivy made sure not to touch it as she zipped up the pocket.

'Here,' Seb grunted, picking something up off the floor. 'You just dropped this.' He handed Ivy a black-and-white photo, the size of a postcard. Ivy had seen it many times before because Granma Sylvie always kept it in her handbag. It was the only photo of her from *before*. The police had found it in the glove box of her car after the crash. 'Weird,' Seb said, raising his eyebrows. 'I haven't seen that since I was little.'

We used to look at it all the time, Ivy thought. But she didn't say anything.

'Granma still doesn't know who the other woman is, does she?'

Ivy shook her head. The photo showed a woman standing beside Granma Sylvie. She was slight, with sharp dark eyes and unruly hair poking out from under a round black hat. She wore a thick tartan dress and studded cowboy boots. Granma Sylvie was dressed in washed denim dungarees with what looked like satin ballet shoes on her feet.

'What were they *wearing*?' Seb asked. 'It's like really bad fancy dress.'

Ivy shrugged. 'Who's to say it wasn't the fashion?' She didn't really think it could have been; she just didn't want to agree with her brother.

'Keep that safe,' croaked a voice. Ivy turned. Granma Sylvie was waving her good arm in their direction.

'Sorry.' Ivy hastily tucked the photo back into the handbag and fastened it up.

Seb slid away from her before she had to push him.

Chapter Two

‘Dad?’ Ivy squinted. The split-screen image on Seb’s phone was distorted and moved in slow motion. She nudged Seb in the ribs. ‘I told you video call was a stupid idea. Why didn’t we just ring them?’

Seb grumbled something about reception and repositioned the phone higher on his knee. ‘If you owned a phone, like most people, you’d know it’s easier to three-way call using video chat. But you don’t. Because you’re weird.’

Ivy rolled her eyes. *Whatever*.

‘Mum? *Dad?* Can you see us now?’ The video flickered. Ivy shifted in her seat. Around her, the A&E department of Bletchy Scrubb Hospital was teeming with people: doctors in white coats with stethoscopes draped round their necks; solemn-faced relatives; nurses carrying clipboards; and hobbling patients clutching swollen limbs. Ivy ran her eyes over the linoleum floor and glossy white walls. There wasn’t a trace of tinsel or glitter anywhere. Three days after Boxing Day, and Christmas had been forgotten about, just like that. Granma Sylvie would hate it.

‘*Ivy?* Are you there?’

‘Dad!’ *Finally*. The image sharpened and Ivy grimaced. Her dad was far too close to the camera, his pale freckled face taking over most of the left of the screen. On the right, Ivy’s mum could be seen sitting at a table in her staff canteen. She was wearing a pale blue nurse’s tunic with a silver fob-watch hanging from the top pocket.

Her mum tucked a stray wisp of brown hair behind her ears and leaned closer, frowning. ‘You’re back now, but you keep going all fuzzy.’

‘I’m on the train to Paris,’ Ivy’s dad called. ‘My reception’s bad. Can everyone see me?’

‘We can see both of you now,’ Ivy said. ‘Did you understand what I just explained about Granma?’

Her dad frowned. ‘Yes, just about. I can’t believe it. Is she all right? Are you two all right?’

Ivy shrugged. ‘We’re OK.’

‘Seb,’ their mum said sternly, ‘are you looking after your sister?’

Seb was slouched in the hospital chair beside Ivy, his scuffed white trainers resting on a plastic coffee table with the phone wedged between his knees. His headphones snaked into his lap.

‘Yes,’ he muttered. ‘Don’t worry.’

Ivy thought for a moment. ‘Seb lied about his age; he told them he was sixteen.’

Seb’s eyes turned to slits as he looked at her. ‘If you’re sixteen, you can be on your own. It’s the law.’

Ivy pulled a face at him.

‘It doesn’t matter about that now,’ their dad said. ‘As long as you stay together. How’s Granma?’

Ivy gazed over at the blue cotton curtain fluttering a few metres behind Seb’s shoulder. It concealed a small room where Granma Sylvie was lying on her stretcher. Ivy paused before answering, trying not to get upset again. ‘She’s asleep right now. We’re in A and E but the doctor said she’s going for an X-ray later. What do you think we should do?’

Her dad hesitated. Ivy could hear the rattle of the train in the background.

‘There’s only one option, really,’ their mum said, pursing her lips. ‘You both return to Granma’s house and sit tight till we get there. Even if I leave now, it’ll be a good few hours before I get to Bletchy Scrubb.’

Their dad started nodding. ‘Agreed. Seb, you can pay for the bus back to Granma’s house out of that money I gave you yesterday.’

Ivy’s heart lifted. ‘So you’re coming back? Both of you?’

Her mum swept a hand across her forehead. ‘Of course we are. You’ve done a great job so far, but don’t worry. We’ll sort everything out when we get there.’

‘I might not arrive till late this evening, but I’ll be there,’ Ivy’s dad told her. ‘You’ll be OK, won’t you? Make sure you have something to eat – look after each other.’ He paused and lowered his voice. ‘Or at least *try* to.’

Ivy glanced at Seb, who was flicking through the track-list on his iPod, only half concentrating on the screen. ‘I’ll try.’

After their dad had waved goodbye, their mum blew a kiss and hung up. Seb put his phone away and his headphones in his ears without saying another word. Ivy sank back in her chair, her thick blue duffel coat creasing up around her. She wished her mum and dad were with her now; this place was horrible.

She crossed her arms and stared out aimlessly across the waiting room. A man in a grey trench coat was coming through the main doors. He was wearing pointed black shoes and a wide-brimmed hat that hid his face. Ivy watched as he slipped between the staff and patients around the reception desk and then flitted past a pair of security guards. He was heading towards them; towards the cubicles where people were taken from the ambulances.

The longer Ivy watched the man, the more certain she felt that he didn't want anyone else to notice him. He kept looking from side to side, timing his movements to coincide with those of everyone around him. As he drew closer, Ivy spied two gnarled yellow appendages poking out of his coat sleeves. She recoiled as she realized what they were.

His hands!

The skin across both palms was covered in pustules and shrivelled, so that his fingers looked like diseased, rotting twigs.

Ivy lowered her face as he went past. She wondered what had happened to him. Maybe he had been in some terrible chemical accident. Certainly it was nothing normal – she'd never seen anything like it, not even in movies. When she raised her eyes, he was standing at the end of a long line of cubicles – the row that Granma Sylvie was in. He peeked behind the nearest curtain, waited a moment, then turned and tried the next one. Ivy watched him repeat the process again and again. He seemed to be looking for something.

Or someone, Ivy thought. She froze as she realized that he was heading in Granma Sylvie's direction.

Seb was nodding his head to a beat, air drumming in his lap.

Ivy sprang out of her seat, thumping him on the shoulder. 'Seb!'

He shrugged her off and pulled one headphone away from his ear. 'Ivy, what's—?'

'There's this man . . .' She turned. He was three curtains away. 'Quick!'

She hurdled over Seb's legs and dashed along the row of chairs, her wellies squeaking on the lino.

Seb sauntered after her, fixing her with a stare. '*What is wrong with you?*'

Her heartbeat quickening, Ivy ripped open the curtain to Granma Sylvie's cubicle. 'Granma, are you . . . ? Oh.'

Her granma looked peaceful, her eyes closed and her hands placed delicately across her stomach – exactly as she had been when Ivy saw her last.

Ivy looked back along the corridor, searching for the man in grey. It was empty; but the man couldn't possibly have had time to disappear. She'd looked away for barely a second.

Seb tramped up to her shoulder. 'This better be good.'

'You don't understand,' she whispered. 'There was this strange man here. I thought he was going to do something to Granma.'

'*What?*' Seb's jaw tightened. 'Why can't you be normal? Like, for once . . . ?'

It was just starting to rain when they reached Granma Sylvie's house, almost an hour's bus ride later. Droplets drummed against Ivy's hood and tumbled through the frizzy hair that stuck out beneath it. She looked up at the familiar higgledy-piggledy outline of the house, with its clay chimney and crumbling plaster walls. It used to be a farmhouse, or so Ivy's dad had told her, which explained why it was in the middle of nowhere.

'You're paranoid,' Seb said, striding past her. 'You know that, right? All the books you read have, like, twisted your mind or something.'

Ivy marched after him. 'I'm *not* making this up,' she insisted. 'There was a man in there with gross hands, and as we were leaving A and E, I heard a nurse say that Granma's notes had gone missing. What if it was the man who took them?'

Seb sighed. 'Ivy, that guy – whoever he was – was obviously just a patient or something. Like, a burns victim. Maybe he was crazy like you. Whatever, anyway – I just want to get inside and eat.'

Ivy yanked angrily on the strap of Granma Sylvie's handbag as she swept past Seb towards the front door. If books had 'twisted her mind', then playing the drums had made her brother deaf to reason. He never listened to her. Ever.

'Ivy . . .' All of a sudden Seb's voice sounded odd.

‘*What?*’ she snapped, turning back to him. He was holding a shaky finger out towards the house. Ivy followed it and almost tripped over. She didn’t understand how she could have missed it . . .

The front door was ajar. The frame was splintered, and there were deep scratch marks around the lock.

Seb lowered his finger to his side as if he wasn’t sure whether to stay or run. Finally he whispered, ‘Police.’ He got out his phone and tapped the screen. Ivy could see it from where she was standing. The words *No Service* flashed as he tried to make the call. *Perfect.*

‘What do we do?’ she asked.

Seb tiptoed over the gravel towards the house and peered in through the front windows. ‘The curtains are drawn,’ he hissed. ‘I’ll have to go in and use the landline.’

Ivy nodded. *Right. Good idea.* ‘What about me?’

Seb looked back at the door. ‘We’ll go in together; you stay behind me.’

As Ivy set foot over the threshold, her skin prickled. There was a slow scratching noise coming from inside, like thick wallpaper being ripped off a wall.

Her eyes flitted into the shadows of the hallway. She just about recognized Granma Sylvie’s antique writing desk – the one with the curling legs and tea-stained top – toppled over on the floor. The drawers were all missing and a pile of thick cream writing paper had been strewn across the carpet.

Seb removed a walking stick from an upturned umbrella stand and raised it above his head. As Ivy followed him, her mind raced. That scratching noise was definitely getting louder the further they went into the house. She wondered what could be making it. She waited as Seb paused to open the kitchen door.

‘Ready?’ He reached for the doorknob with a trembling hand.

Ivy nodded. As the door opened and the air from the kitchen slipped out, she caught a strong whiff of damp dog. *Strange*. The kitchen never smelled of anything other than baking.

The lights were already on, even though Ivy was certain she’d turned them off before they got into the ambulance. Her heart raced as she inched forward. To her left, the kitchen cupboards were minus their doors. Fragments of wood, exploded food cans and torn packets lay scattered across the worktops, and smashed crockery filled the sink. A dirty patch on the wall was the only evidence of where the fridge used to stand. It now lay belly-up on the kitchen tiles, its contents pooling out like vomit.

Ivy took a few steps forward, crunching over spilled breakfast cereal and vegetables. Her gaze fell upon a set of muddy animal tracks trailing across the kitchen floor.

Seb’s voice was faint. ‘Over there . . .’

Ivy drew her eyes away from the prints and followed his hovering finger . . . Right across the opposite wall three words had appeared:

WE CAN SEE

Each of the letters was the size of a dinner plate and appeared to have been scratched into the pastel wallpaper, which now revealed the blood-red of the previous decor.

The implement inflicting this damage, she saw, was a feather – large, glossy and black.

As it continued to write, it hovered in the air like a wasp; then, after scoring two further words into the wall, it disappeared with an indignant puff. In its place, a tiny silver coin materialized, dropping to the floor with a *ping*.

With a gasp, Ivy read the words in all their bloody glory:

WE CAN SEE YOU NOW

Chapter Three

Seb paced up and down the kitchen floor, carving a path through the smashed glass and food tins with his trainers. He was holding what remained of Granma Sylvie's only telephone. The receiver was broken and the cord had been ripped out of the base.

Ivy steadied herself against the back of a chair. Her skin was prickling with shock. 'You saw it flying too – right? What was it?'

'I don't know.' Seb's face was stony. He rubbed his hands down the back of his jeans. Ivy could see sweat forming on his brow. 'What does *We can see you now* even mean?' He gestured around the room. 'And the break-in doesn't make any sense. I've checked the other rooms downstairs but it doesn't look like anything's been stolen. Whoever was here, they've just trashed the place.'

Ivy scanned the room again, picking out what remained of her granma's unique furniture, old books and favourite photos. Her throat swelled. Most of what Granma Sylvie had collected over the years was irreplaceable. Ivy couldn't understand what someone would gain from destroying it. It didn't make sense.

As Seb put the phone down on the kitchen table, she studied the animal tracks again. She splayed out her fingers. The prints were at least four times the size of her hand. Whatever animal had been here, it was much bigger than a domestic pet.

'There's no way to call the police from here now,' Seb said. 'We'll have to cycle towards Bletchy Scrubb till we get mobile signal and then try Mum and Dad.'

Ivy nodded in agreement as the wall behind her crackled. She rotated slowly till she was facing it again. 'Are you seeing that?' she asked.

Seb swallowed.

The *We can see you now* was disappearing shred by shred, as if the wallpaper was repairing itself like living skin.

Seb dragged his hands down his face, pulling his cheeks as if trying to wake himself up. ‘Why is this getting worse?’

Ivy clenched her fists. The only way to stop herself from freaking out was to try to understand what was going on. There must be some logic to it. She re-ran the last ten minutes from the beginning. Granma Sylvie’s front door . . . the scratching . . . the fridge . . . the animal tracks . . . the feather . . . the coin.

The coin.

Ivy searched the kitchen tiles and spotted it in a puddle of tomato soup.

‘Careful,’ Seb warned as she bent to retrieve it.

Ivy’s fingers floated above the coin for a moment before she picked it up and wiped it off. It was about the size of a one pence piece, except silver and bent slightly in the middle, so that it hugged the curve of her palm. After a split-second she discovered something else. The coin was *warm*; like it had been left out in the sun.

‘Anything?’ Seb asked, stepping closer.

Ivy tossed the coin into her opposite hand to discover that the temperature wasn’t the only odd thing about it. It was as if the coin was tickling her, leaving behind a strange – but not unpleasant – tingle on her skin. Squinting, she held it up to the light. The metal was worn in places but she could still make out words written around the outside. ‘It says: *Blackclaw*, *Ragwort*, *Wolfsbane* and *Dirge*.’ She looked up. ‘What do you think they mean?’

Seb jerked his head back. ‘How do I know? Maybe it’s one of Granma’s old antiques. She sold coins in her shop, didn’t she?’

Ivy thought back to the little leaded windows of Granma Sylvie’s antique shop in Bletchy Scrubb – she’d run it with Granpa Ernest right up until his death. ‘Yeah,’ she agreed. ‘But they weren’t like this.’

Seb’s shoulders stiffened. ‘What do you mean?’

The coin was still warm, which was weird enough, but now Ivy felt another sensation, something she couldn’t quite identify. It was like the difference between holding a stuffed toy cat and a real cat. It was the feeling of holding . . . life.

‘I mean . . .’

Something brushed at the edge of her hearing – *a voice*? She hesitated. No, she must be imagining it.

‘What I mean,’ she said again, ‘is that Granma’s coins didn’t exactly appear out of thin air. And this one *did*.’

Just then a clatter sounded from somewhere at the front of the house.

Seb’s head shot round. ‘What was that?’

Before Ivy could answer, the noise came again, followed by the rumble of voices.

They were not alone.

Chapter Four

Ivy's skin turned to ice. 'What if that's them – the people who did this?'

Seb hurried towards the back door. 'Let's not wait to find out.' He leaped over the remains of a china vase and shot through the patio doors into the garden. Ivy pushed the silver coin into her coat pocket and scrambled after him.

The rain sounded like a snare drum as it hit the flagstones. Ivy tried to keep her balance as she followed Seb round the corner and into the alley between the house and a neighbouring field. She wiped her eyes clumsily, completely forgetting that she had a hood.

'Ivy, watch it!' Seb called.

She ground to a stop, arms flailing. Beside the toe of her wellington boot was a large brown hessian sack, the soil spilling out of it. *Granma Sylvie's potatoes.* Ivy winced. She'd grown them in that sack for ever. 'Sorry,' she whispered.

Carefully she hopped over it and inched towards Seb, who was crouching down next to the garage at the front of the house. The rain chimed off its corrugated-iron roof, masking the sound of her footsteps. She tucked herself behind a section of dense yew hedge and angled her head till she could see. Her jaw dropped.

What the—?

In Granma Sylvie's drive stood a funeral coach, complete with four black horses. It was long and rectangular, with glass sides and a strip of ornate carving along the top. Every inch had been lacquered with ebony gloss which matched the head-feathers of the horses. Ivy had seen something like it only once before, on the way to school. Her mum had slowed to let it pass. *That* coach had been carrying a coffin. This one was empty.

No . . . wait.

Ivy squinted. It wasn't empty. Inside she could see a boy. His image was made fuzzy by the rain, but he had dark hair and cinnamon-brown skin. He was sitting with his knees up and his hands clasped around them, his head bent so Ivy couldn't see his face.

'Seb!' she hissed, but his gaze was fixed elsewhere: on Granma Sylvie's doorstep. Ivy turned to see what was going on.

Standing beneath the porch were two men in matching black uniforms: a balding, red-faced fellow with a huge belly and, beside him, a tall lean figure with slicked-back hair, chalky skin and dark glasses. Both men wore ankle-length cloaks, gloves with gleaming silver studs across the knuckles and hats shaped like a pirate's tricorne.

'Shall I use this now, sir?' the red-faced man asked. 'Try to flush out anyone who might still be here?' In his hand was a large conch shell – one of the spiky, salt-encrusted ones you found on rocky beaches. When the other man didn't reply, he said, 'Officer Smokehart, sir?'

The tall man turned towards him slowly, his chin raised. 'Lower the shell,' he said. His voice sent chills shooting down the back of Ivy's neck. It sounded like a knife – vicious and cold. 'If there's anyone inside, we don't want to give them time to escape. They might reveal something useful under questioning.'

Ivy shivered. There was something about Officer Smokehart that wasn't quite natural. Maybe it was the way he was standing: straight-backed and still, like a robot.

'Just imagine, Constable,' he breathed, steepling his thin fingers, 'what answers might lie behind this door; what dark revelations we might find festering in the shadows. For over forty years we've lived without knowing the truth of what happened that night.'

'Twelfth Night,' the constable said, a little uncertainly, setting the conch down on the ground.

Smokehart gritted his teeth. 'Yes, of course *Twelfth Night*. It is the greatest unexplained mystery of the modern era. The entire Wrench family – a mother, father, daughter and three brothers – disappear on one fateful night. We don't know why they vanished, or how. We don't even know what role they played during the Great Battle . . . until now.' His thin lips curled into a smile. 'The quartermasters will have no choice but to promote me for this, mark my words.'

The constable gulped and stood to attention. He looked at the broken lock. ‘Looks like we’re not the first ones here, though, sir.’

Officer Smokehart peered down through his dark glasses. Ivy wondered why he was wearing them – it wasn’t as if it was sunny.

‘She has many enemies,’ he said, considering. ‘It’s possible that one of them has got to her before us. Arm yourself.’

The constable nodded quickly, swept back his cloak and pulled out . . .

Ivy squinted. Surely she was seeing this wrong. The rain was distorting her vision; it must be. White plastic. Long handle. Rounded head of bristles.

No, it was a *toilet brush.* As Smokehart drew an identical one from the loop on his belt, Ivy noticed something else. The bristles were moving slightly. If she concentrated hard enough through the drumming of the rain, she could hear them crackling. And what was that jumping from the end . . . *sparks*?

Ivy’s legs started to tremble.

From his crouched position, Seb waved at her furiously, his nostrils flaring. He signalled towards the far gate, where their bikes were leaning against the fence.

Ivy nodded down the road towards Bletchy Scrubb. That’s where they needed to go.

‘Don’t think we should spend long here, sir,’ the constable commented, pushing open the front door. ‘We’ve got that young tea-leaf in the carriage – needs to be taken back to Lundinor for processing.’

Smokehart raised pencil-thin eyebrows above his dark glasses. ‘Not long? Constable, if this really is where Sylvie Wrench has been hiding for forty years, then we will stay *as long as is necessary* to uncover whatever evidence may be inside.’ Holding his toilet brush aloft, he marched over the threshold into the hallway beyond. The constable followed.

The name *Sylvie Wrench* was ringing in Ivy’s ears as she saw Seb getting to his feet. *Sylvie* . . .

She walked slowly, as if in a dream.

Granma . . .

‘Ivy,’ Seb mouthed. ‘Bikes.’

She snapped back to reality and followed Seb across the gravel to collect her bike. Her wet hands trembled as she tugged her hood back and fumbled with the strap of her helmet. *Sylvie Wrench* . . . *Twelfth Night* . . . Her head was spinning. She got onto her bike and put her foot on the pedal.

And then a voice like thunder filled the air: ‘*This is Officer Smokehart of the First Cohort of Lundinor Underguard! You are breaking GUT law. Remain where you are, by command of the Four Quartermasters of Lundinor!*’

Chapter Five

Ivy shrieked, ‘Seb, go!’ She slung Granma Sylvie’s bag across her back before kicking away from the ground. Up ahead, Seb’s wheels squealed as he shot onto the tarmac and skidded round a corner.

Ivy flashed a look over her shoulder, pedalling frantically. Officer Smokehart was in Granma Sylvie’s porch, holding the conch shell to his lips. The constable had already climbed aboard the black coach.

Rising up off the saddle, Ivy pushed down on the pedals as hard as she could. What sounded like a hailstorm started up behind her, drawing closer.

The horses . . . !

The coach was on the road.

‘Stay close to me,’ Seb shouted. ‘This way!’ He turned off the road, darting through a small gap in the hedgerow and heading into a field. ‘They’re too big to come after us,’ he yelled. ‘They’ll have to go the long way round.’

Ivy could see what he was planning. Ahead of them, the road curved round the edge of the field. Seb was cycling straight across the grass towards an open gate on the opposite side. If they were lucky, they’d get there before the coach.

Ivy hurtled after him. Her bike squeaked and groaned over the bumpy ground. Glancing back, she could see the top of the coach above the hedgerow – it was gaining on them now. The constable was craning forward, flicking a whip through the air, while the horses’ head-feathers tossed around madly.

‘They’re catching up!’ Ivy warned. She didn’t know how much longer she and Seb could stay in front.

‘Go faster,’ he yelled at her, his cheeks bright red, his legs a blur. ‘We have to make it!’

Ivy surged forward into the battering rain. Seb was only metres away from the gate.

'Ivy!' he shouted, crossing the road.

She looked back at the coach, which was nearly upon them. She caught a glimpse of the dark-haired boy inside, pushing against the glass, steadying himself against the jolts.

Smokehart's voice filled the air again. '*STOP WHERE YOU ARE!*'

Ivy faltered as she reached the road. The horses were metres away. She stared helplessly at Seb. His eyes were wide. She screamed his name, and then . . .

The carriage was between them.

A splintering, creaking noise split the air. The constable howled. Ivy was thrown head first off her bike; her helmet took the worst of the impact as she thudded into the hard earth beside the road. Granma Sylvie's bag crunched painfully against her ribs and cold mud splashed onto her cheeks.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a face: angled cheekbones, dark-chocolate eyes, skin like polished teak.

It was the boy from the coach.

'You all right?' he asked. The rain had soaked his long, straggly hair and was running down onto his shoulders.

'Uh . . .' Ivy murmured. Her brain felt like it was made of marshmallow. She struggled with the strap of her helmet and eventually tugged it off. 'What happened?'

'Underguards,' the boy grunted. 'Must have been too interested in chasing you to notice the ice on the road.'

Ivy raised a shaky hand to her temple. *Underguards . . . ?*

'They've overturned in the next field,' the boy continued. 'Looks like your friend saw it just in time.'

Friend? The fog in Ivy's head started to clear. Her neck prickled as she remembered: *Seb*. Carefully she lifted herself up. Her bike was lying some five metres away, the wheels trilling as they spun. A familiar figure was staggering across the grass.

'Ivy!' Seb called breathlessly. 'Are you OK?'

She tried to get to her feet. The boy helped her up. His skinny figure, slim-fitting jeans, black leather jacket and red high-top basketball shoes reminded her of the lead singer in The Ripz. 'Easy,' he said. 'You're gonna feel like you’ve just had a sack of flour dumped on your head, but just try to breathe. Everything moving?’

Slowly, systematically, she wiggled her fingers and toes and tilted her head from side to side. She suspected there were probably a few cuts and grazes hiding beneath her coat but she wouldn’t need an ambulance. ‘I think so. Seb?’ She focused on him as he approached. His gaze was fixed on the stranger in front of him.

‘Who are you?’ Seb asked. Now that they were next to each other, Ivy could see they were probably of a similar age. ‘Are you one of them?’

The boy arched an eyebrow. ‘One of the Ugs? Hell no. I’d rather be a ghoul.’ His eyes went nervously to a spot by Ivy’s feet. ‘I’ve had my fair share of running from them, though – if you two want to get away, you don’t have much time.’

Ivy glanced down, wondering what he was looking at. Standing in the grass by her feet was a small leather suitcase with brass latches. A brown paper tag was tied around the handle. *Strange* . . . Ivy hadn’t glimpsed it in the field earlier.

She bent over and gripped the handle. ‘How did this get—?’ The question caught in her mouth as a wave of tingly heat spread through her fingers. She gave a short gasp: the suitcase felt so much like a hot potato, she struggled not to drop it. She’d had this sensation before, when she held the silver coin. The only difference was that touching the suitcase felt more intense.

The boy stiffened and threw a gloved hand towards the case. ‘That’s mine.’

Ivy held it out to him. ‘All right, I was just—’

Just then, she heard the rattle of a harness in the road.

‘The underguards,’ the boy hissed. There’s no time . . .’ He snatched the case, unfastened the latches, opened it on the grass and dropped onto his knees beside it. ‘Are you coming?’

Ivy’s head was spinning. ‘Coming where?’

Seb dug his fingers into her shoulder. ‘Ivy, we need to do something – now!’

Too late.

The rapid fire of hoofbeats sounded on the other side of the hedgerow. A wild neigh followed the clatter of something loud and heavy, and then Officer Smokehart came tearing along towards them. He moved impossibly fast, his arms pumping as his black cloak mushroomed up behind him. Ivy noticed with a jolt that his face and neck were no longer smooth and pale; they were covered with tiny scarlet dots, like drops of blood. In his outstretched hand he waved his toilet brush, the bristles alive with blue sparks.

‘Go – *now*!’ The boy yanked on Ivy’s arm, hauling her to the ground.

She felt wet grass under her hands as something pushed down on the back of her head. She saw the brown suede lining of the suitcase expanding before a cold feeling slipped down her spine and she was swallowed by darkness.

Chapter Six

Daylight disappeared, along with the fresh smells of grass and wet mud. Ivy gave a dusty cough and reached forward blindly into the shadows. Soft carpet cushioned her hands, sending waves of heat through her body. Her skin felt ticklish. It was the same sensation as before.

‘Seb?’ she cried. ‘Seb! Are you there?’

There was no response. She took a couple of deep breaths but her heart was pounding, her whole body shaking. She smelled old leather and boot polish. She had no idea what that meant. She tried crawling forward. Wherever she was, there had to be a way out.

After a few paces Ivy heard a click, and a sliver of light materialized far in the distance. Her eyes watered with relief as she scuttled towards it. It quickly grew to the size of a letter box, shedding just enough light for her surroundings to become clear. She gasped as she saw the brown suede lining of the suitcase.

Wait – was she *inside* it?

Was she *inside a suitcase*?

She hurried towards the rectangle of light, and when it was big enough, clambered out onto a cold stone surface. Looking back, she saw an identical suitcase to the one she’d picked up in that field – the same fastenings, battered leather and brown paper tag – standing on the floor.

She glanced down at her legs and started. They were *tiny* – the size of rolling pins – but getting bigger. Her bones creaked and her trousers bubbled as if blisters were forming under her skin. In seconds, everything had returned to its normal size.

Trying hard not to panic, she got shakily to her feet and looked around. She was in a huge sandy cave about the same size as her school sports hall. The high ceiling was fitted with two glass discs that oozed butter-yellow light out over the floor, which was packed with the widest assortment of luggage Ivy had ever seen: stacks of suitcases, toppling pillars of hatboxes, piles of handbags and turrets of metal trunks. It was like some sort of cloakroom fortress. She spotted a single opening in the cave wall which appeared to lead off into a dark tunnel.

'Seb . . .' she whispered. She needed to find out where he was. She turned back to the suitcase. The lining seemed to disappear into darkness like some sort of optical illusion. She checked the tag on the handle: *Lundinor* was written on it in black ink.

Lundinor . . . Officer Smokehart had said something about that. The dark-haired boy had called him an *underguard*. She wondered what it all meant.

Just then, the suitcase began to shake. Ivy retreated from it as it rattled across the stone. The dark lining exploded with blond hair and grey sweatshirt.

'Gonna throw up,' Seb spluttered as he fell out of the case and onto the floor. His arms, legs and torso rippled back to normal size as if made of plasticine.

'Seb! Are you all right?' Ivy was filled with relief as she stooped to help him up. His hands felt clammy and cold.

'I really need to—' Before he'd finished his sentence, he was vomiting.

Ivy dodged out of its path just in time. An expensive-looking leopard-skin briefcase was the unfortunate victim. She covered her nose and ushered Seb into a corner of the cave.

'Looks like bag travel doesn't exactly agree with your friend,' a voice remarked, close by.

Ivy spun round. The dark-haired boy was standing behind her, dusting down his knees.

'He's not my *friend*,' she corrected in a tight voice. 'He's my brother. And of course he doesn't enjoy *bag travel*.' She said the phrase like it was a medical term.

The boy smirked as he closed his suitcase. His dark hair fell across his angular face. 'You two use rugs or vacuums, I suppose? You sound posh enough.'

'*Posh?*' Ivy shook her head. 'Rugs or – *what*?'

Behind her, Seb's retching noises stopped. She heard his heavy footsteps staggering over.

'Air are ree?!' He swallowed hard, teeth clamped together, and pointed a shaky finger at the suitcase.

‘Good question,’ Ivy said, resting her hands on her hips. ‘Where *are* we?’

The boy scratched his head. ‘What do you mean *where are we*? Arrivals chamber. Lundinor.’

Lundinor. There it was again . . .

Seb took a large gulp. ‘Lun-di-huh?’ He cleared his throat. ‘Does anyone want to explain how we just crawled through a suitcase to get here?’

The boy narrowed his eyes and assessed Ivy and Seb very carefully, as if taking notes. Then he reached into his leather jacket and pulled out a comb. It was dark brown, made of plastic. ‘What’s this?’ he asked, studying their reactions closely. ‘And what’s it used for?’

Seb and Ivy exchanged an uncertain glance before Ivy fumbled for an answer, more out of politeness than anything else. ‘It’s a . . . comb?’ she said slowly. ‘You untangle your hair with it?’

The boy went very still for a moment, then sucked in a huge breath and dragged a hand along his jaw. ‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘You can’t be. You shouldn’t even be—’

All of a sudden the tinny voice of a shopping-centre tannoy filled the cave.

‘*Traffic build-up in tunnel thirty-four D. Underguards are on site.*’

Ivy searched for where it was coming from and spotted a conch shell hanging from the ceiling, just like the one Officer Smokehart had used. Somewhere outside the cave she heard the crunch of footsteps.

The boy looked around. ‘Don’t just stand there,’ he hissed. ‘Hide!’

Seb threw himself behind a large sun-bleached portmanteau. Ivy looked around desperately, but before she’d had time to pick anything, the boy seized her arm and pulled her behind a set of matching tweed trunks.

And not a moment too soon.

Lumbering through the cave opening came a hulking man in the same black uniform as Officer Smokehart – *an underguard*. He had a thick grey moustache and huge wiry eyebrows, beneath which his small black eyes hid like flies.

Ivy’s heart pounded as she watched him plod into the centre of the cave and sniff. She shot a glance over at the pool of vomit. Seb was hiding a metre away from it, directly opposite her. She could see his scuffed trainers poking out from behind the portmanteau.

Wait . . . I can see *him.*

Ivy jerked forward, but the dark-haired boy hooked his arm around her chest to keep her still. He twisted round, making sure she could see his face, and gestured for her to be quiet. His eyes looked hollow with fear.

Ivy peered back out. She couldn't whisper over to Seb – the underguard would certainly hear her. She just had to hope that the man didn't spot him.

'Ha-hum.' The underguard tapped his polished boots on the floor. 'OK, go ahead,' he instructed, as if speaking into a walkie-talkie.

On his command, a short brown feather popped into the air. It floated in front of him and then tipped upright, zipping to and fro as it wrote a message. The man focused on the words intently, nodding as he read.

Ivy thought back to the feather in Granma Sylvie's house and shivered. She squinted.

NOTICE TO ARREST

SUSPECT ONE: FEMALE, 4' 10". PALE GREEN EYES, BROWN HAIR. AGE AND NAME UNKNOWN. LAST SEEN WEARING DARK BLUE COAT AND YELLOW RUBBER BOOTS. POSSIBLY DANGEROUS.
SUSPECT TWO: MALE, 5' 9". GREEN EYES, BLOND HAIR. AGE AND NAME UNKNOWN. LAST SEEN WEARING GREY HOODED SWEATSHIRT, WHITE TRAINERS AND JEANS. POSSIBLY DANGEROUS.
SUSPECT THREE: VALIAN KAYE. MALE, 5' 7". DARK HAIR. 15 YRS OLD. LAST SEEN WEARING LEATHER JACKET, DARK TROUSERS AND FINGERLESS GLOVES. EXTREME ATTITUDE PROBLEM. KNOWN THIEF.

REPORT ALL SIGHTINGS TO OFFICER SMOKEHART.

The underguard's eyes widened as he read the last line. The feather twirled, gave a puff and vanished.

Ivy's body went rigid. Suspects one and two were unmistakably her and Seb. The underguards were hunting for them, but she didn't understand why. She thought back to what Smokehart had said on Granma Sylvie's doorstep. *Sylvie Wrench* . . . *Twelfth Night* . . . *disappeared* . . .

She wished she could discuss it with Seb. His trainers had now disappeared behind the portmanteau – *thank goodness* – but now she saw his face reflected in a pair of shiny briefcase locks. His cheeks were bulging, his lips pinched together.

No!

Seb threw up onto the floor with a sound like a plughole being unblocked.

The underguard jumped as the sound reverberated around the cave. He immediately turned in Seb's direction.

'Who's there?' He growled.

Ivy tried to dart forward, but the boy's arm prevented her. She felt his other hand clamp over her mouth.

'Well, well, well . . .' The underguard stepped forward, grabbing Seb by the top of his hoodie. 'What do we have here?'

Seb tried to break free as he was dragged out from behind the portmanteau. 'Get off me!' His face was greenish and sweaty. 'What's your problem?'

The man shoved him out into the middle of the cave and took a good look at him. Ivy could almost see him checking off the description of Suspect Two. His eyes narrowed. 'My problem, son, is *you*.' He slid a tiny object out from under his long cloak. Ivy saw a flash of silver between his fingers.

'A *paperclip*?' Seb exclaimed. 'What are you gonna do with that?'

The underguard smiled wickedly and shook the paperclip twice. It unfolded till it was straight, and then lengthened. In a streak of silver it leaped out of the underguard's hand and onto one of Seb's wrists.

'Hey!' Seb's hands snapped together, and then the paperclip wrapped itself around them. 'What the—?' He strained to pry them apart again. 'You can't do this!'

The underguard took him by the shoulder, pushing him towards the cave exit. 'You're under arrest. I wouldn't struggle if I were you; uncommon paperclips don't like to be pulled apart.'

Ivy got one last glimpse of her brother’s features before he disappeared into the passageway. His brown eyes darted around wildly.

He was looking for *her*.

Chapter Seven

By the time the boy finally relaxed his grip around Ivy’s shoulders, Seb’s footsteps had disappeared. ‘Get off me!’ she spluttered, ripping his hand off her mouth. She inhaled deeply and scrambled away, sending a few loose suitcases flying. ‘What is *wrong* with you?’ she screamed. ‘That’s my brother!’ She stumbled into the centre of the cave and made a beeline for the exit.

Her head was spinning.

Seb . . .

She had to get him back. She tried to think what her mum and dad would do if they were there, but the situation was so unbelievable she had trouble imagining them there at all.

‘Where have they taken him?’ she growled.

The dark-haired boy got to his feet, rubbing his shoulder where a large suitcase had just struck him. ‘To the underguard station,’ he said matter-of-factly, ‘in the main cavern.’

Ivy came to a stop. *The underguard station* . . . She didn’t even want to consider what might happen to Seb if Officer Smokehart got hold of him. ‘Where’s that?’

He considered her for a moment, cocking his head to one side. ‘Tell me, why are the Ugs even after a commoner like you? It doesn’t make sense.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Ivy said. ‘And I don’t care. Just tell me how to get my brother back.’

The boy rubbed his chin. ‘*If* I tell you,’ he said carefully, ‘you’ve gotta promise to do me a favour.’

‘*What?*’ Ivy balled her hands into fists. ‘I’m not doing anything to help *you*.’ She marched towards the exit, her face burning. It was that idiot’s fault that Seb had been arrested in the first place – and he had the audacity to ask for her help!

When she got to the opening, she came to a halt. The passageway outside was shadowy and quiet. She wondered which way the underguard station was, or if it was even down there at all. She remembered Seb's wide eyes, searching for her as he was taken away. She clenched her teeth and turned back. 'What's the favour?'

The boy grinned. 'I need you to fetch me something from another cave down here. It shouldn't be difficult.'

'If it's not difficult,' Ivy said, 'why don't you do it yourself?'

He put his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. 'I wish I could, but you see . . . my name's Valian Kaye.'

Ivy snorted. It made sense now. *Valian Kaye* – the third suspect on the underguard's list. *And a thief,* she recalled. That's why he'd been in the back of the underguard's coach. He must have been arrested.

'They're looking for you too,' Valian reminded her. 'But your face isn't as well-known as mine and you have one other advantage: you're a mucker, and that means they can't track you.' He peeled off his gloves and stuffed them in his jeans pocket, flexing his fingers. 'That should slow them down a bit.'

Ivy's head felt woozy. 'A mucker? Wait. Slow down . . .' She could feel a sharp pain behind her eyes – the kind you get when you've been staring at something for too long. She wondered if the effects of the bike crash were catching up with her, or if her brain was just suffering from information overload. She reached for a nearby stack of leather trunks to steady herself. The hairs on the back of her hand stood on end as heat shot through her fingers.

Not that again . . .

She shivered and stepped away. Of course she needed to save Seb, but she also had to find out what was going on. 'If I go and fetch whatever it is you want,' she said sharply, 'then you have to tell me how to get my brother back, *and* explain about everything else – about the underguard, about 'muckers', about where this cave is, about why that suitcase was able to bring us down here. Do we have a deal?'

Valian tapped his foot. 'If I tell you all that, I'll be breaking the law.'

Ivy's thoughts returned to the underguard's *Notice to Arrest* message. 'I doubt that's a problem for you,' she remarked. 'And anyway, do you have a choice?'

He stared at her for a long moment without breaking eye contact. Eventually he said, ‘Fine. Follow me.’

Apart from Ivy’s footsteps, the narrow passageway leading off from the cave was unnervingly quiet. It was lit by the same glass discs and smelled faintly of incense. Ivy dragged her fingers over the grainy walls as she walked behind Valian, looking for signs of wires or plugs, but there didn’t appear to be any. With a shiver, she wondered what was powering everything if it wasn’t electricity.

Valian looked over his shoulder and noticed her examining the walls. ‘They call this an arrivals tunnel,’ he said. ‘There’s a whole network of them down here. We’re under Blackheath, in London.’

Ivy froze. ‘London?!’ She tried to process that. Bletchy Scrubb was six hours’ drive from London, so how had they come all that way in a . . .

‘The suitcase,’ she asked. ‘How does it work?’

Valian’s shoulders tensed. ‘I can’t tell you here. There might be an Ug waiting round the next corner. Follow me.’

They continued in silence for another ten minutes, snaking through a labyrinth of – as far as Ivy could tell – *identical* tunnels. She stumbled along, her mind full of questions. Eventually Valian stopped at an intersection of three passageways. He checked that they were clear before speaking. ‘There’s only time to explain it once, so you’d better keep up.’ He pointed to one of the glass lights. ‘Do you recognize this?’

Ivy stared hard at the object. It was about the size of a side plate, glowing with cool yellow light. There was a conical bit sticking up in the middle and a grooved lip around the edge. At first she couldn’t identify it, but then she realized that if you took it off the wall and turned it on its back, it would look a lot like . . .

‘A lemon squeezer,’ she said, surprising herself. ‘We have one in our kitchen at home.’

Valian pointed to the ceiling. ‘And that?’

Ivy tipped her head back and gasped. Hanging from the roof of the tunnel by a short length of chain was a metal colander, the kind used to drain spaghetti. Silvery wisps of smoke leaked out of the holes and then dissolved into the air.

‘Colander?’

Valian nodded. ‘It filters the air down here so that we can breathe. The lemon squeezers give out light. They’re a bit like lamps, except better for the environment – and no electricity bills.’

‘They . . . *what*?’ Ivy shook her head, resting a hand against the wall. ‘How is that possible? The ones at home can’t do that.’

Valian shrugged. ‘That’s because the ones at home are all *common*. The lemon squeezer and the colander here . . . They’re both *uncommon*.’

Uncommon. The word struck a chord in Ivy’s mind. The underguard who’d arrested Seb had mentioned that his paperclip was uncommon . . .

She looked down. ‘Right . . .’ she mumbled, trying to follow Valian’s explanation. ‘So if an object’s uncommon, it means it can do something amazing. But how? Is it, like . . . magic?’

‘Magic?’ Valian gave a wry smile. ‘Hate to ruin your fairy tale, kid, but magic doesn’t exist.’

Ivy felt her cheeks flush. After everything she’d seen that morning, it wasn’t *that* stupid a suggestion. ‘OK, well then, what makes uncommon objects special? How can you tell the difference between that lemon squeezer on the wall and the one I have at home?’ She swallowed as she watched the clean yellow light coming from its centre. ‘I mean, apart from the fact that it’s glowing.’

‘For most of us, that’s the only way you *can* tell,’ Valian said. ‘There are some people who can . . . Well, that’s not important. As for what makes them special,’ he continued, ‘let me ask you a question: what’s the most powerful force in the world, the most incredible and extraordinary thing in existence?’

Ivy frowned. She was no good at riddles and she certainly didn’t have the patience for them right now. ‘I don’t know.’

Valian’s dark eyes glittered. ‘Us,’ he said. ‘*We* are. Most of the time we die and go on to the next world, right? No problem. But sometimes we don’t go on, we get stuck; or rather *part* of us – the soul, the spirit, the eternal bit, whatever you wanna call it – gets stuck . . . in an object.’

The hairs on the back of Ivy’s neck stood on end. ‘*WHAT?*’

‘Shh,’ Valian whispered. ‘Keep your voice down.’ He glanced nervously down each of the three tunnels, then rummaged around inside his leather jacket. Eventually he retrieved a tattered roll of paper and opened it out in front of her. ‘There’s more. Here – read this.’

Ivy’s heart was racing now. She could feel pressure building behind her temples again as she looked down at the piece of paper.

NOTICE OF THE PROCLAMATION OF
THE UNDERMART OF LUNDINOR

At 12 midday following the day on which it is announced by the four Quartermasters of the Undermart:

All manner of uncommoners, alive or dead, may take notice that in the Great Cavern of Blackheath under the Olde City of London, and the passages, caves and chambers adjoining is now to be held an undermart for Christmas Day and the twelve days following, to which all traders may freely resort to buy and sell according to the Liberties and Privileges of the Great Uncommon Trade (GUT).

The notice was signed at the bottom in swirly handwriting: *Mr Punch, Quartermaster of the Great Cavern, Guardian of Lundinor.*

Ivy raised her eyes slowly. The pain in her head was getting worse. ‘This doesn’t help. I’ve never even heard half of these words before. What does *undermart* mean?’

Valian rolled up the notice and stuffed it back into his jacket. ‘Undermarts are markets that only sell uncommon objects. There’s one in the caves down here, called Lundinor. We’re sent these notices the day before they open for trade.’

Ivy blinked. ‘A market?’ She didn’t know what she was expecting, but it wasn’t that.

‘Classic mucker reaction,’ Valian muttered, smiling.

‘You keep calling me that,’ Ivy complained. ‘I don’t even know what it means.’

‘The people who are welcome in undermarts are called *uncommoners*,’ Valian explained; he sounded bored. ‘Everyone else is a *commoner*, or *mucker* for short because of that saying *common as*—’

‘*Muck?*’ Ivy guessed. ‘How nice.’

His face darkened. ‘Yeah, well, uncommoners don’t like outsiders. You can’t just join the Trade. You inherit the right to be an uncommoner through your bloodline. If your parents were uncommoners, then you will be too. There’s no other way in, and that’s the way uncommoners like it.’

Ivy was puzzled as to why Valian kept describing uncommoners as if he wasn’t one of them. *If it runs through the family*, she thought, *then his parents must have been uncommoners too. He’s not exactly an outsider.*

‘Muckers are banned from undermarts,’ he continued. ‘And if an uncommoner reveals anything about the Great Uncommon Trade to a mucker’ – he ran a finger across his throat – ‘the underguards get cranky.’

Ivy looked at him. It was obvious that he was risking his life by explaining all this to her, just so that she would retrieve something for him. She wondered, with a cold feeling of unease, what could possibly be that important.

All of a sudden something bright yellow and squealing came streaking down the tunnel towards them.

‘Mind out the way!’ called a shrill voice. ‘Coming through!’ A woman in a fluorescent workman’s vest and knee breeches was riding something – Ivy squinted: was that a *doormat*? – like it was a skateboard, except that it didn’t have any wheels and just hovered in mid-air. Valian dodged nimbly aside, but Ivy had to launch herself against the wall.

‘Sorreeeee!!’ the lady called as she zoomed past. ‘I’ve just bought it! Haven’t learned how to use the brakes yet!’ Her voice followed her down the tunnel and out of sight.

Ivy winced as she straightened. Valian pulled up his collar and rolled his eyes. ‘We need to go – *now*.’

Minutes later, they came to a stop in front of a mountain of rucksacks, all piled on top of each other like rocks after a landslide.

‘Damn it.’ Valian bent forward, picked up a bag and chucked it behind him, where it landed with a soft thud. ‘Well?’ he asked Ivy. ‘Are you going to help? We need to get through these.’

She tentatively grasped the looped handle of the nearest rucksack. As her hand closed around it, a soothing wave of heat rolled up her arm like a warm breeze. She concentrated as she held on, trying not to let Valian see her reaction. She didn’t need to be a genius to understand what was going on. Every time she touched something uncommon – whether it was the silver coin, Valian's suitcase, or any of the bags down there – she could *feel* that they were different.

The more she thought about it, the more uncomfortable she felt. It couldn't have been happening to the others; Seb hadn't mentioned anything about it after he came through the suitcase, and Valian didn't react when he picked something up.

So what was different about her?

'Don't be fooled by the huge number of bags down here,' Valian said after a few minutes. He heaved aside a heavy sack. 'Uncommon objects are still rarer than moon rock. A common person could go their whole life and never come across one. Uncommoners use special methods to find them. That's why Lundinor only opens three times a year; everyone spends the rest of the time getting hold of something worth trading. Right now we're in the middle of the winter trading season – that's when Lundinor opens, from Christmas Day till Twelfth Night.'

Ivy struggled for words; there was too much to say. The more Valian explained, the more frighteningly real Lundinor became. 'This whole thing is insane,' she said finally, dropping a bag on the floor. 'You know that, right? How come no one knows about this? Think of all the amazing things people could achieve using uncommon stuff. You could probably save lives.'

'Or end them.' Valian snatched at another handle. 'Part of the reason uncommoners keep the Trade secret is to prevent uncommon objects from getting into the wrong hands. There's a whole guild of traders whose job it is to conceal the uncommon world from muckers, just to protect them.'

He shoved a few more bags out of the way and then looked up at the shrinking pile. Behind it was a dark, square hole in the wall. A selection of leather belts hung from a row of hooks beside it. 'Elevation shaft,' Valian explained, pointing. 'No one uses it much any more. It'll be the safest way for you to travel.'

As Ivy considered the dark hole, her mind returned to her brother. She pieced together what Valian had told her. If, as a mucker, she was banned from undermarts, it was going to be harder than she thought to get Seb back. 'The underguards . . .' she said. 'They're like your police, right?'

Valian lugged a heavy canvas backpack out of the way. 'They're meant to be.'

Ivy pictured Officer Smokehart with his – she now guessed – *uncommon* toilet brush, and hoped Seb was all right. She reached down for the strap of one last rucksack; it was making a funny chattering sound. When she bent closer, she spotted something tied to it – a tortoiseshell comb.

'Careful!' Valian yelled. He grabbed the bottom of the bag and threw it onto his pile. As it hit the other bags, it made a strange clicking sound before falling silent.

Ivy stared at it. 'What the—?'

Valian reached into his jacket pocket and brought out his comb again. 'Remember this?' He stroked it gently, and in a startling instant the plastic teeth transformed into real gnashing canines and incisors, set into brown plastic gums.

Ivy shrank away, aghast.

Valian shrugged. 'It's an anti-pickpocket device.' He stroked the comb in the other direction and then tucked it back into his pocket. 'Objects have different uses when they turn uncommon,' he said, scrambling over what was left of the rucksack mountain. When he reached the rail of trouser belts, he threw one back to Ivy and took another for himself.

Ivy jumped up to catch it.

'Uncommon belts kinda do what normal belts do,' he called, fastening the buckle. 'They hold things up.' He raised the belt above his head and was instantly lifted off the ground.

Ivy felt dizzy as she watched him float up to the cave roof. She looked down at the belt in her hands. Shifting all those warm uncommon rucksacks had left her palms sweaty, but there was something else she had noticed every now and then.

Whispers.

Careful not to let Valian see, she held the belt to her ear. If she listened closely, she could hear voices. She couldn't tell what they were saying – they seemed to hover at the very edge of her hearing – but she wasn't imagining it. If the heat she felt was real, then the voices were too.

She took a deep breath and clutched the belt tightly. She'd have to figure out what was going on later. Right now she needed to focus all her energy on rescuing Seb.

She peered over at Valian, who was sinking back towards the remains of the rucksack mountain by lowering the uncommon belt past his waist. Once safely down, he stepped over to the elevation shaft. 'Just copy me,' he called. ‘We don’t have much time.’ He lifted the belt over his head and immediately rose up off the floor. Using his elbows to nudge himself clear of the walls, he headed into the shadowy hole and floated upwards.

After Valian’s feet had disappeared, Ivy hauled herself up the rucksack hill and leaned out over the edge of the opening. There was only darkness beneath her, heavy with the smell of stagnant water. Her face flushed. She still couldn’t believe this was happening . . .

‘Hello?’ Her voice echoed in both directions.

There was no response.

Chapter Eight

Cool air streamed through Ivy's wet curls as she soared up the elevation shaft, Granma Sylvie's bag rocking gently around her hips. The sensation was incredible.

I'm flying.

I'm actually flying.

She could feel her face glowing with exhilaration as she clutched the uncommon belt tightly above her head, marvelling at the fact that she didn't need to do anything. It wasn't as if she was hanging from the belt; the belt seemed to be holding her up.

A square of pale yellow light glowed above her – the entrance to another tunnel. As she floated up to it, Valian offered her an elbow and she pulled herself in, reaching down with her toes as she slowly lowered the belt.

I just flew. In the air. Using a belt.

She spotted a smirk on Valian's face as he returned his belt to another set of hooks on the wall. As she copied him, she tried to hide her amazement. She reminded herself that Valian had made no effort to stop Seb from being arrested. She shouldn't trust him.

He leaned back against the wall, stretching his shoulders. 'I can't go any further,' he said casually. 'Beyond this point I'll be recognized.' He gestured down the tunnel. 'When you get to the T-junction, take a left, then second right. After the cave filled with suit-carriers you go left, then down the passageway that smells of boot polish. That'll lead you into the main arrivals chamber.'

Ivy peered ahead. The thick gloom of the passageway was broken only by a few strips of weak lemon-squeezer light. She tried not to let Valian see her fear. 'Er – what exactly do you want me to get for you?'

'Just a candle.'

'*Just* a candle?'

Valian studied his nails. ‘It’s uncommon, OK? I need it to get into Lundinor, to visit someone who can clear my name.’ He nodded in the direction of the main arrivals chamber. ‘All you have to do is get into the cave. The candle trader has debts to settle with me, so you won’t have to pay him; and you don’t need to worry about finding him. He’ll find you. He always does.’

Ivy didn’t like being given orders by someone so suspicious. ‘Fine. But first you have to tell me how to get my brother out first. That was the agreement.’

Valian raised a hand. ‘All right, I know. The underguard station is in Lundinor, through the Great Gates. You’ll find those in the main arrivals chamber – they’re the ones with Sir Clement and Lady Citron, the founding traders of Lundinor, on either side. And next to them you’ll see some ladders. They’re the best way out of here for muckers – they’re not used much any more so they won’t be guarded. But first make sure you get my candle. Bring that back and I’ll tell you the rest – how to break into the underguard station and get your bro out of there.’

Ivy huffed. She should have known there would be some security for him in the arrangement. ‘Fine.’

Valian shrugged off his leather jacket. Beneath it he was wearing a black T-shirt with what Ivy assumed was the logo of a heavy metal band – it involved a rose wrapped in barbed wire. ‘Here, take this.’

Ivy scowled as he thrust the jacket into her arms. ‘Why do I—?’

‘Because you’ll need it, OK? You won’t get very far in that coat. The Ugs have circulated your description, remember? They all know what you look like.’

Ivy groaned and reluctantly peeled off her duffel coat, depositing it in Valian’s arms, then put her granma’s bag over her shoulder again.

‘Anyway,’ he said with a hint of glee, ‘you’ll need to be wearing something a bit different in order to fit in. Uncommoners all wear Hobsmatch.’

‘What’s that?’

Valian’s eyes twinkled. ‘You’ll find out soon enough.’

Ivy fiddled with the strap of Granma Sylvie’s handbag, repeating Valian’s instructions over and over in her head. *Left, then second right* . . .

After the third turn, the tunnel walls started to shake with noise. Ivy fought the urge to turn back. The further she went, the louder the rumble of voices and shuffling footsteps became. Eventually she turned the final corner and was forced to grip the rock for support as a wall of sound rose up to meet her.

‘*Whoa . . .*’

In front of her was another chamber, but this one was *gigantic*. The gaping roof glittered with red-brown stalactites, as long and jagged as giant fangs, and the walls were so high they disappeared into shadow. Against them were stacks of every type of bag imaginable: ostrich-leather handbags, sequinned purses, neoprene rucksacks, canvas sacks, duffel bags; even the odd cheap, rustling carrier bag tied onto the sides of larger cases. If the first arrivals chamber Ivy had crawled into was like a cloakroom fortress, then this one was more like the Colosseum.

On the floor hundreds of uncommoners bustled around, hopping over cases, bags swinging at their sides, some dragging children behind them. Ivy remained in the shadows of the tunnel while she observed them. She struggled to take in all the costumes: there was a lady in a silky kimono and herringbone tweed jacket; a man wearing breeches and a Hawaiian shirt; another lady in camouflage trousers, platform shoes and a baseball cap. Ivy watched wide-eyed as three kids wearing tight plastic raincoats over Roman togas chased each other through a group in petticoats and puff sleeves. Men in cycling shorts and sombreros stood next to others in top hats and tunics. There were fancy feathered collars, felt berets, shimmering Egyptian headdresses, fur stoles, medieval veils. It was as if everyone had taken bits of fashion throughout history and put them all on at once.

So this is Hobsmatch, Ivy thought. She didn’t quite know what to make of it. The rich colours and elaborate designs were beautiful, but it didn’t exactly look practical – all those ruffs and heels – and yet she guessed it suited uncommoners. They were collectors, after all. Hobsmatch must be a good way to show off.

She tried to pick out a few faces, though it was easy to get distracted. The people were as diverse as any she’d seen at an airport. And – her heart sank – none were carrying candles. Valian had said that this candle trader would find *her*. She wondered if she should go and wait somewhere.

Everyone was funnelling into the mouth of a tunnel in the far wall, positioned between two colossal iron gates. The vast hinges were set into the statues of two figures who held hands, forming an arch over everyone below. One was a stately man in a long-sleeved jerkin with a garland of oranges around his neck; the other an elegant woman wearing a tasselled dress decorated with lemons. Ivy stared at them. They looked grand, like the statues of ancient gods she'd seen on trips to the V&A with her dad. *The one with the oranges must be Sir Clement*, she thought, *and Lady Citron has to be the one with the lemons.* She wondered what her dad would make of them.

Between the two statues stood the Great Gates – which, according to Valian, meant the ladders would be close by. Ivy hunted around and, sure enough, spied a shadowy gap between two stacks of cases, where silvery rungs glinted against the wall. Her shoulders tensed. That was her and Seb's way out.

Turning up the collar of Valian's jacket, she curled her trembling hands into fists.

Here goes . . .

She stepped out.

It was like being trapped in the middle of an enormous school reunion where everyone had come in fancy dress.

'Kitty, I haven't seen you in ages! Your chain mail looks great – is it new?'

'How're the kids, Arthur? I heard your two'll be trading this season.'

'Ooh, yes. I saw those floods on the news. Must have been *terrible* for you down at the bottom of the country. How did your robes survive?'

Ivy slipped carefully between the puffed sleeves and flouncy skirts, a cold, heavy feeling settling at the bottom of her stomach like wet cement. *Keep it together*, she told herself. *This is real. You've got to rescue Seb.* She fixed her eyes on the ladders ahead.

'You read the *Chronicle* this morning?' Ivy heard one of the traders say. ''Eard there's been some sort of scandal at the Ug station. Something to do with the Wrenches.'

'Wrench? I haven't heard that name in years.'

'Well, it's hardly surprising . . .'

The name *Wrench* tripped alarm bells in Ivy's head, but the din of the crowd was so overwhelming, she couldn't think straight. A trader in an embroidered tunic and a kilt swished past carrying a basket of brass kettles. Everyone was hefting something – muddy bicycle wheels slung over shoulders, dusty wine bottles stuffed under armpits.

Suddenly something swooshed close to Ivy's head and she looked up as a dark shape passed over her. It zoomed towards the Great Gates, before slowing down so that Ivy could identify it: *a man riding a flying vacuum cleaner.* She looked back up to discover a multitude of other traders flying in and out of the stalactites. Some were straddling broomsticks, mops or feather dusters, while others knelt on flying rugs or doormats.

'Hello, missy.'

Ivy froze as she felt a hand on her shoulder. She spun round and came face to face with a toothless, wrinkled old man.

'Bleedin' vacuum fliers,' he croaked, rubbing his hunched back. 'No care for pedestrian safety, absolutely none!' He was holding the broken pieces of a cardboard sign mounted on a long wooden stick. Ivy could just about make out what it said: INVISIBILITY CANDLES: 8 GRADE.

The man raised a fist towards the roof of the cavern. 'Broke three signs this week!' he shouted. 'If I ever get my hands on one of you ruffians . . .' He shook his head and turned his foggy turquoise eyes towards Ivy. 'Don't suppose I can interest you in a candle, dearie? Eight grade's an awful good price, honest.' As he smiled, his tanned skin creased like baked mud.

Ivy didn't say a thing. She didn't even move. *He'll find you*, Valian had told her. And here he was . . .

'Er – yeah, I need a candle,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady. In the pockets of Valian's jacket, her hands were trembling. 'It's for someone else. He said you had a debt to settle with him.'

The old man squeezed his lips together and frowned. 'A debt, you say?' He scratched his scalp. 'Who sent yer?'

Ivy hesitated and half smiled. 'Valian Kaye?'

The man spat in her face. 'Pah! Owe 'im a candle? 'E must be kidding. Boy's gone raving mad. 'E owes me objects to the value of fifteen grade!' He shook his head. 'Owe 'im a candle indeed!'

Ivy tried not to gag as she wiped the spittle off her cheek. *Lovely.* Valian had lied, but she still needed that candle. 'Wait,' she said. 'Maybe there's something I can give you in return.’ She started searching through Valian’s pockets. There must be something uncommon there—

‘Ouch!’ Ivy’s fingertips burned as something bit her. She withdrew her hand and looked into the pocket. The lining was wriggling.

The comb! Of course.

‘How about this?’ Ivy pulled the comb out carefully and pointed it away from her, trying to keep control of the gnashing teeth.

The man inspected it from a distance, rubbing his chin. ‘Not bad, not bad. But what would I use it for?’ He signalled to the loose, tattered shirt he was wearing. ‘I don’t have no pockets.’

Ivy racked her brains. ‘Er . . .’ The man held her gaze. His irises were swirly dark blue now, like a lagoon. ‘Maybe you could attach it to the top of your sign to stop people flying into it?’ she said hopefully.

The man looked angrily down at his broken sign and then, slowly, he smiled. ‘You got yerself a deal there, missy.’ He held out his hand, which was encased in a fraying grey gardening glove.

Ivy sighed with relief as she shook it.

The man glanced at her bare fingers. ‘Best make sure yer wearing gloves in there,’ he said, nodding towards the Great Gates.

‘Yeah, thanks,’ Ivy said dismissively, registering the advice at the back of her brain. She was more interested in getting the candle. After the old man had handed it over, she shoved it in her pocket, trying to ignore the fact that it was black and odd looking.

‘Yer jus’ gotta blow it out to use it,’ the man instructed before turning to leave. ‘It only works if you’re touchin’ it, mind. If you let go, you’ll become visible again.’

Once the old man had disappeared, Ivy turned round and set off through the crowd. When the main arrivals chamber was well behind her, she sprinted down the last tunnel to Valian, anticipation surging through her. She had the candle; now she just had to make sure that Valian kept his side of the bargain. She was still determined to give him a piece of her mind when she found him. It served him right that she’d had to give away his comb. She felt the uncommon candle between her fingers as she dashed round the corner. ‘Valian?’ she hissed. ‘I’ve got it!’

The tunnel was empty.

Ivy hurried to the end and called down the elevation shaft, but there was no reply. She ran back and looked down the two adjoining passageways.

‘Valian?’ she whispered. She didn’t understand why he wasn’t there. Then she spotted it: a shadow on the floor. As she drew closer, she realized what it was.

My duffel coat?

In the dust beside it lay the silver coin. Ivy picked it up and closed her fingers around it thoughtfully, letting the warmth surge through her. Valian must have found it and left it there for some reason.

She scoured the surrounding area and, in the next tunnel, found scuff marks on the floor and five long scratches down the wall.

Something had happened to Valian.

Chapter Nine

Ivy collapsed onto the dusty floor, feeling all her confidence ebb. Maybe Valian had been arrested, or maybe someone else had found him and he'd got into a fight and run off. Whatever had happened, Ivy doubted he was coming back. She was going to have to rescue Seb without his help.

After a few blank, cold minutes she reached for Granma Sylvie's soft leather handbag and sniffed. She knew what her granma would tell her, if she was there: *Get up, Ivy. You're all Seb's got. Come on, get up!*

Slowly she rose to her feet. To make herself feel more comfortable, she tugged off Valian's leather jacket and replaced it with her duffel coat. The wool still smelled like the vanilla air freshener her mum sprayed around at home. She tucked the silver coin into her pocket, ignoring the strange warmth spreading through her fingers, and tried to concentrate.

Think, Ivy. Think . . .

She went through Valian's pockets and got out the uncommon candle. The old trader's sign had read: INVISIBILITY CANDLES.

Ivy examined it closely as it heated her palms. The candle looked like a blob of black pudding with a short wick that burned with a crystal-white flame.

How she had missed that it was already lit, she didn't know. She turned the candle around slowly, careful not to touch the flame. It didn't dance as it moved, like a normal one; it remained straight and unbroken. Ivy somehow suspected that if she did touch it, it wouldn't even feel hot – it hadn't damaged the inside of Valian's jacket, after all. She tried to recall the old man's parting instructions: *blow it out to use it; keep it in your hand at all times.*

Blow it out? Right . . .

It was worth a try. Ivy took a deep breath and aimed it at the flame.

Here goes nothing, I suppose.

The white spark wobbled and then faded. A puff of black smoke climbed up from the wick. It curled through the air with a low hiss, spiralling around Ivy. In seconds it had surrounded her in a wall of murky gas, but before she had time to panic, the wall dissolved, and her surroundings were visible again. The wick was left trailing an almost imperceptible wisp of grey mist.

Ivy stuffed Valian's jacket under her arm and pointed the candle ahead of her like a talisman warding off evil spirits. She wondered if it had actually worked; if she really *was* invisible . . .

She guessed there was only one way to find out.

The toes of Ivy's yellow wellies peeped out into the arrivals chamber, her body remaining firmly in the shadows of the tunnel. Her heart was thudding away inside her ribs. In front of her, buzzing with noise, were thousands of people who brought a whole new meaning to the word *stranger*. And she wasn't welcome here, she knew that.

She took a quick step forward while she still had a shred of courage, and began weaving her way through the crowd. Her eyes darted from face to face, checking reactions. It was the strangest thing she'd ever done in her life – making sure she was invisible. She could imagine Seb's face if she ever told him.

A minute went by. Then another. Not a single person made eye contact with Ivy. But that was almost normal. She was so small that not many people did notice her; not many adults, anyway. She couldn't assume that the candle had worked just yet. She had to make sure.

Over by a mountain of studded leather trunks, a man with oiled black hair and a twirly moustache was calling to the crowd.

'Feast your eyes on the latest Hobsmatch trends this season, ladies and gents!' He gestured to three rails loaded with strange garments. 'I've got the most talked-about looks from Paris and New York, straight off the Hobwalk.' He slid a floor-length mirror out from behind a rack of thick fur coats. 'Free to try and take a look!'

Ivy stopped when she saw the mirror. It was the perfect way to test her invisibility. She made her way carefully towards it, her eyes scanning the faces of the nearby traders. None of them seemed to notice her. When she was close enough, she stepped in front of the mirror, and then looked up.

And . . . nothing.

No Ivy. No candle. No leather jacket; no handbag.

Ivy waved her free hand around and jumped up and down. The trail of smoke from the invisibility candle left a scribbly pattern in the air, but it wasn't visible in the mirror, and neither was she. All Ivy could see was the reflection of the bustling arrivals chamber behind her and a woman in a large hat hurrying towards the mirror—

Oomph!

The woman smacked straight into Ivy. Ivy squeezed the invisibility candle tighter as she steadied herself, and quickly shuffled out of the way. The woman – dressed in ankle warmers, leggings and a padded leather jacket – looked as if she'd just woken from a dream.

'What the . . . ?' she muttered to herself, frowning vaguely in Ivy's direction as she straightened up in front of the mirror.

Ivy's body tensed. She was invisible; the candle had worked – it must have. But now she had a new problem. If no one could see her, then it would only take one step out of place for her to be discovered.

Deciding to avoid the crowd as much as she could, she began skirting the edge of the cave, close to the towers of luggage. After a few moments she came across a group of children gathered around a man sitting on an upturned suitcase. He had long dark hair, a large nose, and wild, bushy eyebrows that moved up and down as he addressed his audience.

'The Fallen Guild came in the dead of night,' he was saying in a whispery voice. 'Six hooded figures, desperate for blood.'

The children gasped, eyes fixed on the ground in front of him. Ivy snuck closer to see what had captured their attention.

The man was holding one hand out in front of him, twitching his thin fingers in time with his words. 'They did not come for the blood of grown men,' he went on, 'for it was too bitter for them to drink.'

On the end of each of his fingers was tied a short length of white string, the kind you'd use to fasten a brown paper package. Ivy realized that something uncommon was being used when she looked down at the floor and saw six hooded figures rising from the dust. The stringless puppets appeared to be made of dirt, leaves and tiny pieces of rock. She blinked, astonished, as the puppets jerked and swayed in perfect synchronization with the five pieces of string, despite the fact that they weren't attached.

'Instead,' continued the puppeteer, 'it was the sweet, innocent blood of children that quenched their thirst.' His voice was dark and hollow. 'And do you know how they captured little children?' He twitched his fingers, sending the hooded figures rocking towards the children, their arms extended like zombies. 'They'd sing songs late, late into the night, when the children's parents were fast asleep and they were still dreaming. And the children would rise from their beds and go out into the street . . .' He spread a hand wide, nodding to the six creepy puppets. 'That's why the Fallen Guild named themselves after a song; a *Dirge*.'

The children screamed in terror and quickly hurried away. The puppeteer chuckled to himself as he removed the string from his fingers and allowed the hooded figures to disappear back into dust.

Ivy shivered as she swiftly moved on. She had assumed that the puppeteer was telling some sort of dark fairy tale, but now she had a horrible feeling there was more to it than that. She wiggled her fingers around in her pocket, feeling for the uncommon coin. She remembered that the word *Dirge* was written around the edge; she just didn't know why.

She gazed at the crowd. No matter how scared she felt, she knew she had to focus on Valian's instructions. Everyone's Hobsmatch was bulky and distracting, but if she could nestle alongside someone as they passed through the Great Gates, she might be able to get in undetected. She had to choose a suitable candidate. Some traders were too fast or too doddery; some kept stopping to talk to people or pick up extra goods. Eventually Ivy settled on a huge man in a purple turban; on one shoulder he carried a large cardboard box full of leather footballs – perfect for her to sneak under.

As she approached the gates beside him, Ivy counted at least a dozen underguards. She scanned their faces but couldn't find Officer Smokehart or the one with the grey moustache who'd taken Seb. She shuffled to a stop as the big man paused to take something out of his pocket.

Ivy's eyebrows drew together when she saw what it was: a pair of yellow rubber gloves.

She looked at the other traders. They were all doing the same: putting on a pair of gloves – from thick knitted mittens to fur-trimmed driving gloves.

'Stay in line, please!' one of the underguards called. 'Let's keep this orderly.'

Ivy remembered what the old candle trader had told her: that she must be wearing gloves in Lundinor. *Thank you, invisibility candle*, she thought as she carefully squeezed between the two lines to see what everyone was waiting for.

At the head of every queue, mounted on a table, sat a polished silver bell, each one supervised by a pair of underguards. Ivy had never seen bells that size before. They looked like you'd be able to hear them ringing a mile away. There was a symbol engraved on the front of each one: a swirling fingerprint.

The underguards appeared to be instructing each trader to ring one of the bells before passing through the Great Gates. It was too noisy for Ivy to hear what they were saying, but she could tell one thing:

They're checking for something.

Sneaking past them might not be as easy as slipping through the crowd.

She retreated behind Mr Turban, a horrible feeling knotting up her insides. As they approached the bells, she held her breath.

'Gloves, sir?' the underguard at their checkpoint asked. The man nodded. Ivy's heart was in her mouth as she watched him reach out and ring the large silver bell.

But the bell didn't ring.

It *spoke*.

'Thaddeus Kandinsky,' it said, in a high, sing-song voice. 'Sports equipment specialist trader. Primary undermart: Helsior in Norway.'

Ivy gasped. She was shaking now – but she had to keep it together.

The underguard nodded. 'Very well, sir. Come on in. Enjoy your visit.' He stretched over and handed Thaddeus Kandinsky a tea-stained old pamphlet the size of a postcard. 'You might find this useful.' Ivy saw what was printed on the front:

LUNDINOR
Farrow's Guide for the Travelling Tradesman

Thaddeus Kandinsky stuffed the guide in his pocket, right by where Ivy was hiding, and plodded through the checkpoint.

Following him closely, she had no time to feel relieved. Past the Great Gates was another tunnel ending in a large dark hole. Thaddeus Kandinsky was swept along by the crowd as they all funnelled through, and Ivy struggled to keep up with him. She stretched up onto her toes to try and see above the heads in front but it was no use. However, she did notice something curious. There were words carved into the tunnel walls:

> Rules, Laws and Bye-laws
>
> - No goods may be traded before the raising of the glove on Christmas Day or after the extinguishing of Old Meg on Twelfth Night. Any outlawed transactions which are discovered shall be investigated and the perpetrators fined. Penalty: 50 grade
> - No uncommoner shall take the pitch, lodgings, spot, corner or shop of another trader without prior written consent from the trader – to be approved by a quartermaster. Penalty: 30 grade

As Ivy's eyes scanned the list of rules and bye-laws, she grew more and more anxious. In a few minutes she'd be in Lundinor, in the very heart of this unbelievable place. She tried to prepare herself – maybe the undermart would have street stalls like Portobello Market, or even little shops like Covent Garden.

Except they're both common markets, Ivy reminded herself. She had to try to think more *uncommon*.

She glanced at the old guide hanging out of Thaddeus Kandinsky's pocket and wondered if it might help her find the underguard station. Hoping that Mr Kandinsky would understand, Ivy made a silent apology as she reached a hand towards the guide and gently tugged it free. The trader didn't feel a thing.

Stuffing the guide into her pocket, Ivy scurried away as the crowd fanned out onto a wide stone terrace that looked over Lundinor.

As Ivy caught sight of the view beyond, her legs went weak.

Lundinor wasn't just a market.

It was a *city.*

A sea of crooked rooftops, spires, towers and chimneys – belching everything from smoke to bubbles to glittering fireworks – stretched into the distance. The cave was so big that Ivy couldn't even see the surrounding walls. She crept to the edge of the terrace and looked down at the web of cobbled roads and shadowy alleyways, flickering with lights and movement.

No. Way.

It wasn't possible. An entire city hidden beneath London?! Ivy remembered what Valian had said about uncommoners protecting their secrets, but this was extreme. She wondered what uncommon objects they'd used to keep the place from being discovered.

All around her, uncommoners began making their way down to the cave floor. Those who had brought goods on trolleys and carts loaded them onto uncommon rugs to be flown down, while everyone else went down two large flights of steps chiselled into the cave wall on either side. Ivy searched around for someone to camouflage her, and found two tough-looking traders in kilts and judge's wigs heading towards the steps, carrying a grandfather clock between them. Ivy tiptoed over and carefully fitted herself beneath their cargo, crouching down as they moved off.

Once on the cave floor, she retreated to a quiet spot in the shadows of the stairs, where she tried to gather her thoughts.

OK, now what . . . ?

She needed a plan. Just then, she heard a crackling noise and looked down.

Wait – no!

The wisp of black smoke that had been trailing from the wick of the invisibility candle was now fading as a flame spluttered back into existence. The black wax, in some bizarre, reverse way, seemed to have shrunk. Ivy shook the candle and blew on the flame, trying in vain to put it out again.

Eventually she had to admit defeat. She turned her eyes away from the steadily burning white flame and looked out into Lundinor.

A chill swept over her.

She was visible.

Chapter Ten

Ivy knew she had to act fast. She tore off her duffel coat, half tripping over the sleeves as she tried to turn it inside out. The notice for her arrest had described her as wearing a blue coat; the red lining might make her less identifiable. She tossed what was left of the invisibility candle into Granma Sylvie's handbag, tugged the bottom of her jeans over her yellow wellingtons and tugged her hood up to cover her hair. With Valian's leather jacket tucked under her arm, she set off.

She headed towards the first buildings, which were small and crooked, with gnarled wooden beams and sloping snow-topped roofs, like houses on a Victorian Christmas card. The uncommon lighting made the place feel like a film-set. She looked around. No one seemed to be paying her any attention . . . for now.

She pulled out the pamphlet, opening it at the first page.

RONID NULOT EMO CLEW

Ivy frowned. *OK* . . . She flicked through the rest of the guide. There was text on every page, but it was all written in gobbledygook. *Another language maybe?* The only part that was in English was the title on the cover. *Great*. Her shoulders slumped. She shoved it back in her pocket and sighed; she'd have to think of another way to navigate Lundinor if she was going to find Seb.

Her eyes scanned the market; there was only one road leading in – a wide cobbled street flanked by wrought-iron streetlamps. Cautiously she approached the nearest one. It was decorated with a wreath of berries, and a fist-sized bell hung from a hook at eye level. Checking that no one was watching, Ivy reached up and tapped it gently. Her fingers came away tingling with a pleasant warmth.

It's uncommon. Now what?

Unlike the bells by the Great Gates, there was no fingerprint symbol on the front. Instead, Ivy saw the image of a compass.

I wonder . . .

She grabbed the short length of rope that hung from the bottom and shook it gently. A voice rang out clearly.

‘*You are on the Gauntlet, Lundinor,’* it said, immediately falling silent.

Ivy thought for a moment and then rang the bell again.

‘*The Gauntlet, Lundinor,’* the bell repeated.

‘Is that all you can say?’ she whispered, hoping no one was close enough to hear.

The bell remained quiet. Ivy waited for a moment. Eventually it gave a small, purposeful cough. ‘*I’m only supposed to speak when you ring me,’* it said, in a hushed, slightly annoyed voice.

Ivy whispered an apology, stretched up and rang it again. ‘Do you know where I can find the underguard station?’

‘*Underguard station?*’ the bell repeated. ‘*The closest one is on the other side of the cavern. An hour north of here. End of Runner Street.*’

An hour . . . ? Ivy’s heart sank. She repeated the address in her head and wandered back onto the cobbles. Ahead of her, the Gauntlet seemed to stretch on for ever. Hulking grey stone buildings rose up on either side, lurching towards each other. Beneath them, the pavements were crammed with brightly coloured kiosks that spilled over into the road. Traders riding broomsticks, doormats and rugs flew over the rooftops, while the thud of a thousand footsteps made the ground shake. The noise would have easily drowned out Seb’s loudest drum practice.

Ivy took a deep breath. The air was thick with delicious smells, making her mouth water: sweet roast chestnuts, freshly baked bread and spiced fruits. *Just act normal*, she told herself. *Don’t attract attention.* But it was almost impossible to contain her amazement. It was like stepping into the pages of a Victorian history book, except . . . with uncommon objects.

Traders shuffled around in all directions. Some sang out to passers-by, trying to drum up business.

‘Lovegrove’s Leather Dashers! Belts for all elevations! Best in Lundinor!’

‘Sale on long-haul bags, ladies and gents: at least two grade reduction!’

Above Ivy’s head, shop signs creaked as they swung to and fro. AL-DIN & SON FLYING CARPETS, OLD MR TANNENBAUM’S UNCOMMON DECORATIONS, ROY. G.

BIV’S ART SUPPLIES, LIMELIGHTS’ CITRUS LAMPS. She stopped by the open windows of one particular store and peered inside. There was a length of ribbon suspended across the glass that seemed to be moving of its own accord, twirling into a message.

Welcome to Gil’s Glove Shop!
Proprietor: Gilbert Grandiose – Glove-Maker for All Ages

Behind the ribbon was a circular room fitted with glass drawers. The front of each displayed a glove – violet suede, lace-cuffed, buttoned, leather, cotton, rubber . . . The room was dimly lit by half a dozen floating milk jugs. Ivy could tell they were uncommon – not just because they were hovering, but because, as they tipped over, a liquid gas poured out, glowing like stardust.

Standing in the middle of the room was a man with beady eyes and an absurdly huge white moustache which curled around his face, almost touching his ears. He wore an apron covered in oily stains and a name badge that said: GILBERT, THE ONE AND ONLY! There was a bobbing crowd of children in front of him, none of whom were wearing gloves.

‘Now,’ Gilbert said, sticking out his chest. ‘Can anyone tell me what uncommon gloves are used for?’

One of the children – a stout boy in a Roman centurion’s helmet – stuck his hand up. ‘My mum says they’re like her credit card because they remember every transaction she makes.’

Gilbert beamed. ‘An excellent analogy, Louis. Uncommon gloves record the trades of whoever is wearing them. That’s why uncommoners have to shake hands at the end of every deal. Is there anything else they do?’

A girl with a lilac bow in her hair raised her hand. ‘The most important thing they’re used for is to tell the underguard where you are at all times. That’s why you have to wear them inside the Great Gates, even if you don’t want to.’

‘Correct,’ Gilbert agreed. ‘After you take the glove, the underguards know exactly where you are, *all* the time. That’s how they catch criminals. Uncommon gloves are used for all kinds of official business, they don’t just help you trade. They are the keys to all Lundinor.’

‘But what does taking the glove actually *mean*?’ asked the boy in the helmet.

One of the other children – a very small girl in a pale pink tutu – pointed up to a pair of long silk dress gloves. ‘Can I just take those ones?’

Gilbert hushed the group. ‘Taking the glove is a lot more special than that. You must be at least secondary school age – and be nominated by one of the four great quartermasters of Lundinor. It is a mark of your responsibility to the Trade and your promise to live by the rules of GUT law.’ He held out his hands, encased in a pair of apple-green suede gloves. ‘When you wear a pair of uncommon gloves for the first time, a bond forms between you and them. You keep the same pair of gloves your whole life. They are with you for every trade you make and’ – he lowered his voice – ‘they know if it is honest or dishonest.’ He pointed to a spot on the wall.

Ivy followed his thin finger. Beside a drawer containing a pair of old leather boxing gloves was a framed poster. There was writing at the top and then a photo:

REMEMBER
If you perform an illegal deal according to GUT law, your uncommon gloves will leave a permanent mark against you.

She looked at the photo beneath. It showed a pair of yellow, rotten hands, the skin infested with maggots.

‘The man in grey,’ she whispered. She clapped a hand over her mouth as she backed away from the window. She hadn’t meant to say it out loud. But . . . she had seen hands exactly like that this very morning, in the hospital. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Ivy continued along the street. Some things were starting to make sense. The man in grey was an uncommoner – an extremely shady one, if that glove poster was anything to go by. It couldn’t have been a coincidence that he was poking around in the hospital that morning. Maybe he *had* been looking for Granma Sylvie – just like Ivy had suspected at the time. And that meant . . . she was in danger.

Ivy clenched her fists as she hurried towards the underguard station, weaving her way through the traders. When she had rescued Seb, they had to get back to the hospital as quickly as they could. Her heart pounded as she dodged and ducked past traders, desperately hoping she'd make it to the underguard station without being identified as a mucker. The crowd slowed as they approached a crossroads in the Gauntlet. Ivy tried to squeeze through, but the traders were standing shoulder to shoulder and she found herself stuck between a wooden cart heaped with old chairs and a kiosk with a yellow awning. She heard shouts up ahead. No one was moving.

She turned to the stall beside her. Its owner seemed to have disappeared, but Ivy saw that it sold *coins*. Hundreds of them – shiny copper, dull silver, six-sided, circular, all stored in little plastic pouches – hung from the metal poles of the canopy. Every face was engraved with a portrait, although Ivy wasn't familiar with any of the heads on show. She reached down into her reversed pocket and fumbled around for the silver coin. Her fingers tingled as they found it.

'Can I interest you in anything, little one?' A head of curly red hair popped up from behind the stall. 'Maybe a nice tuppence?' The lady took one of the pouches and pulled out a small copper coin. 'You can put the image of your sweetheart on it.' She flipped the coin over several times. With each turn the face changed. 'Can fit eight different pictures on this one – see? Much better than a common photo frame.'

Ivy blinked. *Eight different pictures . . . ?*

Just then the crowd started to move. She shook her head shyly at the stallholder and shuffled along. In her pocket, she turned the silver coin over and over between her fingers, thinking.

The coin is like a photo frame . . . Which meant that it held pictures of people. Ivy couldn't remember seeing a face on it before, but at the time she'd been more interested in the words around the edge. She hadn't bothered to flip the coin over and check it again. She needed to have a second look.

To her surprise she soon spotted a shop that seemed to be closed – the front windows were empty and the heavy glass door was shut. *Odd* . . . all the others were clearly open. Still, Ivy climbed the three black steps up to the front door. She looked around, checking that no one was watching, before retrieving the coin.

The portrait engraved on the front was of a hooded face in a tusked mask, most likely that of a man – the jaw was too large and square for a woman. Ivy flipped the coin over several times, but in the gloom she couldn’t make out the other faces. She leaned back, angling the coin to catch the light.

All of a sudden she slipped and lost her footing. Her head struck the door, and then there was a crack, followed by a long groan as it swung inwards. Ivy tripped over Valian’s jacket and fell head-first into the shop. The coin rolled out of her hand and onto the floor with a loud *thrum.*

Chapter Eleven

Ivy clambered to her feet, wincing. She wasn't quick enough to stop the door rattling to behind her. She squeezed her eyes shut, tensing as the sound reverberated around the room. After a moment's silence she slowly opened them again.

The shop was empty. Or at least – she corrected herself – empty of people. The small room was filled with row upon row of bells – gleaming brass bells, acorn-shaped wooden ones and stone bells with strange carvings on the side. Ivy had never seen so many different designs. She guessed that she was looking at a lifetime's worth of collecting.

She made a hurried search for the silver coin. At the very back of the room, beyond the bells, was a large counter and, behind that, a door. Ivy spotted something glinting on the floor beneath the hinged flap in the counter top. *The coin.* Maybe if she was really quiet, she could just nip over, pick it up and leave without anyone knowing she'd been there.

She tiptoed slowly into the room, gawping at the array of bells. Each one had its own wooden plaque mounted below it. There were tiny silver sleigh bells and huge brass ship's bells; bells from pet collars and bells from musical instruments. Some were extremely old. Ivy read one plaque that said ALARM BELL, 1901, but further along she spied a much less familiar WELL-WISHING BELL, 1642 and also a BELL OF TRUTH, 405 AD.

As Ivy passed, a few of the bells swayed on their hooks and whispered to each other.

'*Who's she?*' one asked.

'*What's she wearing?*'

A clutch of small gold bells twitched as Ivy ran her eyes over them. The plaque below read SINGING BELLS.

'*Any requests?*' they asked, in a single harmonious voice.

She timidly shook her head and scuttled on. At last she came to the desk. Upon it was one more bell – this one larger than the others and so highly polished she could see a perfect reflection of herself in it.

She looked awful. There was mud in her damp, frizzy hair and a web of thin red scratches on one cheek. She turned to read a hand-scrawled sign that was propped up beside the bell.

ETHEL DREAD'S HOUSE OF BELLS
RING FOR TRADE – OTHERWISE GET OUT

Ivy gulped. The owner didn't exactly sound friendly – perhaps that was why the shop had looked shut. As quietly as she could, she bent down and reached for the silver coin.

The bell on the desk twitched. '*Ethel!*' it squawked loudly. '*Ethel, get out here!*'

Before Ivy had time to run, the door at the back swung open and she heard the screech of a chair, followed by a groan and some footsteps.

'I'm coming, I'm coming! Bloomin' interrupting my lunch . . . You'd better have a good reason fer—' A sour-faced woman emerged through the doorway. She had dark eyes, a crooked nose and frizzy black hair that sprouted from under a flowery headscarf. She wore leather biker's gloves on her hands, dusty combat boots on her feet, and loose navy overalls covering the rest of her.

Ivy recognized her face immediately.

No, it can't be . . .

She rose slowly from the floor. Ethel took a step closer. 'And 'oo might you be, then?' she asked, in a thick Cockney accent.

Granma Sylvie's photo.

Ivy couldn't believe it: this was the woman in that picture – the one from Granma's life before the accident; the one she kept in her handbag. Ivy had seen it hundreds of times; this woman looked older, but it was definitely her – the same jaw, the same angular cheekbones, and the same sharp gaze.

When Ivy didn't answer, Ethel's eyes narrowed. 'Whatcha doing 'ere?' She reached over and pulled Ivy's hood back. Her hair bounced out from beneath it.

Ivy shot a look back at the silver coin. She hadn't been able to grab it. 'I, er—'

‘Left something down there, ’ave you?’ Ethel asked slowly. ‘How’s about I get it for you?’ She bent down and snatched the coin up with her thin fingers. Standing straight, she opened her palm to take a look at it.

The bells started whispering as Ethel raised a hand to her chest and staggered away from Ivy. ‘Where did you find this?’ she hissed. ‘D’you know what it *is*? D’you know what would happen to me if someone found that ’ere, in my shop?’

Ivy stumbled to find words, but no sounds came out. A cold, prickly feeling rose up through her chest and her throat tightened. ‘I don’t know anything about it,’ she squeaked finally. ‘Please, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be any trouble but I can’t leave now. You see, I’ve seen you before, in a photo with my granma.’ She scrabbled through Granma Sylvie’s handbag, catching sight of the photo tucked away in the corner. ‘Here . . .’ She held out the picture with a shaking hand.

Ethel’s cheeks flushed as she saw it.

It was exactly as Ivy remembered it from earlier that morning: the young Granma Sylvie standing with her arm round Ethel, both of them wearing fancy dr—

Ivy blinked. She took the photo back and stared hard at the image. ‘Hang on . . . What was Granma Sylvie doing wearing Hobsmatch?’

Ethel peered into Ivy’s face, a frown deepening across her forehead. After a moment’s consideration she flapped a hand towards the windows. ‘Shut the blinds,’ she ordered. ‘We’re closed.’ The bells hanging above the main window swung to the side, releasing a venetian blind that was fixed beneath them. It fell to the floor with a dusty thud. Ethel jabbed a finger towards the large silver bell on the desk. ‘You!’ she barked. ‘Let me know if anyone so much as thinks about coming in.’ She returned the silver coin to Ivy, looking at her anxiously. ‘You’d better take that out back,’ she said, pursing her lips. ‘We’ll talk there.’

The door at the rear of the shop opened into a dark storeroom. When Ethel switched on a lamp, Ivy saw that on one side were racks of bells padded with foam or cotton wool, while on the other were shelves of other objects – a trombone, an old-fashioned skipping rope, a set of skittles and a moth-eaten teddy bear. The place smelled like the inside of a rabbit hutch, and as Ivy crunched over the floor, she realized why: it was covered with a layer of pale golden straw.

Ethel shut the door behind her. ‘You should sit,’ she said, pulling up a velvet-cushioned piano stool.

Ivy took the seat gladly, her legs like jelly. Ethel drew up a wooden dining chair and plonked herself down. She nodded to the photo in Ivy’s hand. ‘Let me see it again.’

Ivy handed it over. She couldn’t stop staring at Ethel’s face. The lines around her eyes were sadder than Granma Sylvie’s, but they were probably about the same age, Ivy thought. Ethel had slightly hunched shoulders, a wicked slash of a mouth and callouses on all her fingers. Her eyes were the colour of flint.

‘How do you know my granma?’ Ivy managed at last. She couldn’t believe it. Granma Sylvie’s mysterious past was sitting directly in front of her. This woman actually knew Granma Sylvie. Ivy wondered what her mum and dad would say.

Ethel’s eyes were shining. ‘Is she alive?’

The question felt like a punch in the chest. Ivy nodded.

Ethel sighed and smiled. ‘That’s good to know. We was friends a long time ago.’ She reached across and picked up a steaming bowl of something from one of the shelves. ‘The best of friends.’ She slurped up a spoonful of whatever it was. The noise echoed in the small room.

Ivy looked around at all the strange objects stored away in the semi-darkness. ‘Wait . . . Did she know about Lundinor?’

‘*Know* about it? Sylvie grew up in Lundinor, like me. Her family – the Wrenches – come from a long line of powerful uncommoners.’

Ivy sat up straight. ‘But Granma Sylvie doesn’t have any family other than us. She’s never mentioned the Wrenches . . . She doesn’t know about uncommoners.’

Ethel put down her spoon. ‘Look, your gran is an uncommoner and so are you. Ain’t she explained all this?’

Ivy’s entire body went rigid. ‘I’m—’ She couldn’t finish the sentence aloud. *I’m an uncommoner?* After what Valian had said, it did make sense – the right to be an uncommoner ran in a family. But Ivy wasn’t . . . She couldn’t possibly be . . .

She tried to clear her mind. This was too much to take in all at once. She looked back at the photo. Ethel had said that she and Granma Sylvie were friends once, but that was so long ago. ‘What happened?’

Ethel stirred whatever was in her bowl, but she appeared to have lost her appetite. ‘Nobody knows.’ Her voice was cold. ‘Twelfth Night 1969, Sylvie disappeared, along with the rest of the Wrenches. The entire family – Sylvie, her three brothers and her mother – vanished in one night. The underguard searched for them all for years afterwards but never found any trace. It became one of the greatest unsolved mysteries in uncommon history.’

‘Twelfth Night 1969?’ Ivy repeated. She had never forgotten that date . . . *the night of Granma’s accident.* ‘There was a snowstorm that night,’ she recalled slowly. ‘Granma Sylvie had a car crash that gave her amnesia. She doesn’t remember anything about her life before the accident.’ She gestured around the storeroom. ‘She doesn’t know about any of this stuff.’

Ethel’s eyes widened. Her spoon was shaking in her hand. ‘She don’t know?’ she whispered. ‘But . . . ?’ She looked down at the coin in Ivy’s hand. ‘Then whatcha doing ’ere, with that?’

Ivy tucked the old photo back into the handbag and unfurled her fingers so that the silver coin was lying flat in her palm. The heat soaked into her skin, making her fingers twitch. She wondered if the sensations were connected to her being an uncommoner – maybe it happened to others as well.

In the low light she could just about see the masked face on the coin. ‘We found it,’ she explained. ‘My brother and me. We were at Granma’s house this morning and there was this black feather writing on the wall.’ She swallowed as her mind took her back. ‘It said *We can see you now*.’

Something flickered in Ethel’s stony eyes.

‘What’s wrong?’ Ivy could tell that the message meant something.

Ethel’s jaw was tense. ‘There’s only one organization that uses black featherlights: the Dirge.’

‘The Dirge . . . ?’ Ivy’s skin prickled as she turned the coin over, remembering the creepy dust-puppets she’d seen in the arrivals chamber. The image on the other side of the coin changed to another hooded, masked face, this one with fangs. ‘I read that word on the coin. What does it mean?’

Ethel turned away, staring into the lamplight. ‘It’s a long story; one that folk don’t talk about no more.’ She settled her bowl back on the shelf and sighed. ‘Uncommoners belong to guilds. Each guild ’as a particular responsibility and a particular coat of arms. I belong to the Right

Honourable Guild of Bell Traders, for example. The Dirge was an ancient guild of scientists ’oo studied uncommon objects. Their coat of arms showed a coin – an old crooked sixpence.’

Ivy looked down at the silver coin in her hand. When she’d first found it, she noticed that it was bent in the middle.

‘In the beginning,’ Ethel continued, ‘the Dirge’s research ’elped build Lundinor and many other undermarts around the world. They discovered ’ow to use uncommon colanders to filter the air, ’ow to carry ’eavy loads on uncommon rugs – it made ’em famous. But they soon became obsessed with unlocking much darker secrets – things to do with controlling the very essence of uncommon objects: human souls.’

Ivy had a sinking feeling. She didn’t like the sound of where this was going.

‘When everyone discovered what the Dirge ’ad been up to, a new GUT law was passed that forbade anyone from tampering with the uncommon part of an object. The Dirge were ordered to disband and, over time, their story became no more than a page in uncommon ’istory. Then, sixty years ago, when your gran and I were teenagers, they reappeared.’

Ivy gasped. ‘What happened?’

‘It started with the disappearance of a child,’ Ethel told her. ’A young boy no older than you was kidnapped in the dead of night from ’is room above one of the shops on the Gauntlet. ’Is parents found a crooked sixpence resting on ’is pillow and a black featherlight from the Dirge ’overing above ’is bed. The message claimed that the boy had been taken for research. When the coin was examined, it showed six disguised faces – the new members of the guild.’ Ethel paused. Ivy could see the lines around her eyes more clearly than ever. ‘Within weeks, children were going missing from all quarters of Lundinor. The underguard could find no link between the victims and didn’t know where the Dirge would strike next. A campaign of other attacks followed – arson, theft and, finally, murder. A crooked sixpence was found at the scene of every crime. It became the Dirge’s calling card.’

Ivy thought back to the black feather in Granma Sylvie’s house and her hands shook. It suddenly felt dangerous to hold the crooked sixpence. She flipped her palm over and watched it drop to the floor.

‘Nobody knew ’oo the six members of the Dirge were. They used code-names to keep their real identities a secret: Blackclaw, Ragwort, Wolfsbane, Monkshood, Nightshade and Hemlock; each named after a different poison.’

Ivy shuddered as she remembered reading some of those names on the crooked sixpence.

‘The underguard ’ad difficulty finding ’em because it was said they met in a Hexroom – a chamber that can only be entered by uncommon means. Fear spread through the streets like a plague. In the end people were too scared to even say the Dirge’s name and they became referred to simply as the *Fallen Guild.*’

‘What happened to stop them?’ Ivy asked. Something must have put an end to it all.

Ethel lowered her eyes. ‘Everything culminated in a huge battle on Twelfth Night – the night Sylv disappeared. The Dirge ’ad rallied certain . . . people around ’em. An army, of sorts. They very nearly won, but at the last minute the tables turned and they were pushed back. Five of the six members managed to flee, but one was caught and unmasked. After that, the other five were never seen or ’eard of again.’

There was silence as Ivy allowed this information to wash over her. Ethel reached down and picked up the crooked sixpence, depositing it back in Ivy’s lap. ‘But if Sylv ’as been sent that coin, it can only mean one thing.’

‘The Dirge are back,’ Ivy finished with a gulp. ‘That’s what you were going to say, isn’t it?’

Before Ethel could respond, a high screech filled the air. ‘*Ethel!?*’

Ivy flinched.

‘*Underguard Sergeant to see you, Ethel! Ethel? Can you hear me?*’

The bell on the desk; Ivy recognized its voice.

Ethel sprang out of her seat like a jack-in-the-box. ‘Put it away,’ she whispered, looking at the coin. ‘Find somewhere to hide.’ She laid a hand on Ivy’s shoulder. ‘I’ll do everything I can to ’elp you.’ She turned towards the shop. ‘I can always bloody ’ear you!’ she yelled. ‘And so can ’alf the street!’ She switched off the lamp, then marched through the door and slammed it shut behind her. For the second time that morning Ivy was plunged into darkness.

Chapter Twelve

Ivy dropped to the floor, feeling her way forward. Ethel’s story about the Dirge was still running though her head, but so was Ethel’s last instruction.

Hide.

She crawled past what she remembered was a row of bells and headed for the furthest corner, disturbing the dusty straw as she did so. She had to pinch her nose to stop herself from sneezing.

Muffled voices came from the front of the shop; she could only make out the odd word.

‘Ms Dread . . .’

There was a rustle and the screech of a chair being dragged across the floor.

‘. . . trespassers. Uncommoners . . . haven’t taken the glove. There is a warrant out for their arrest. A girl and a boy. Here are the details . . .’

Ethel muttered a complaint.

‘We still need to search the premises. You never know who or what may stow away.’

Ivy started. *Search the premises?* But . . . they’d find her. She was in total darkness; she had no idea if there *was* anywhere to hide, let alone how to get there. She shuffled forward as fast as she could. Her heart was pounding.

The storeroom seemed to go on for ever. Eventually the underguard’s voice faded away. Ivy began to wonder if there was a back door to the room or a hatch in the wall.

Ahead of her, she spotted a sliver of light coming up through the floor, illuminating a narrow shaft of dust. She inched towards it and rummaged around in the straw, to find that one of the floorboards had a hole in it about the width of her thumb. If there was light beneath her, she thought, there might also be a way out. She gave the floorboard a tug and felt it groan, but it seemed to be stuck.

She reached into the darkness next to her and ran her hands over one of the shelves. She needed a tool to lever the floorboard up. Wave after wave of tingly heat flowed into her fingers as they touched a number of oddly shaped uncommon objects. Eventually her hands met something cool.

Something common.

It was long and heavy, with a scratchy fabric covering. Ivy pulled it down to examine it in the shaft of light. The fabric was an old stained piece of canvas tied with string; wrapped inside it was a small paintbrush and a rusty hammer. She ran her fingers across each one. The string felt uncommon, but the paintbrush and hammer were cool to the touch.

She set to work wedging the hammer into the gap in the wood and pushing down on it with her foot, easing the floorboard away. There was a loud crunch and the board pulled free. Ivy hastily wrenched up the next board along, till the gap in the floor was just big enough for her to squeeze through. She swung her legs over the side, peering into the shadows below.

She didn’t know for sure that it would be safer down there, but she didn’t fancy her chances with the underguard. She dropped Granma Sylvie’s bag and Valian’s jacket through first, before grabbing the canvas, string, hammer and paintbrush.

I’ll return them, she decided as she tossed them down before jumping through the gap herself. She didn’t want evidence of her escape to be left behind.

Her wellingtons thumped as she landed on a hard surface. She appeared to be in the foundations of the House of Bells – a concrete L-shape with bare bricks around it. In one corner, a wooden hatch swung from its hinges allowing a flicker of light through from the street outside.

There it was: her way out. Ivy slid the floorboards back into place over her head. The space beneath the building was tight, but she was small. With Granma Sylvie’s bag over her shoulder, she wrapped the tools in the canvas, stuffed it into Valian’s jacket and shoved them both under her arm, then dropped onto her hands and knees and shimmied towards the exit.

Before she had made it to the hatch, she heard a voice.

‘Helping, please!’ it whispered. ‘Dear oh. Helping, please!’ The voice was high pitched and muffled, with a distinctive lisp; it sounded like a little boy trapped somewhere.

Ivy stopped and looked around.

‘Pleases me find you!’ the voice insisted, louder. ‘Mud in the stuck! Mud in the stuck!’

Whoever it was, they didn’t seem to be talking in coherent sentences. Ivy scanned the ground, looking for mud. The concrete floor finished a short distance from the edge of the building, leaving a few inches of soil. Ivy crawled towards it.

‘Yes, am I here!’ The voice was so high now, it sounded like a whistle.

Ivy glanced at the patch of earth. She couldn’t see anything trapped in it, but then she didn’t know what she was meant to be looking for. She pressed her fingertips into the nearest section. The soil was warm.

Something uncommon? It must be buried, Ivy thought, prodding it experimentally.

‘Hee-hee! Tickles do you!’ the voice said.

Ivy could feel the soil trembling as the voice spoke. She began digging. A metal object the size of a doughnut started to take shape in the earth.

Carefully Ivy picked it up and tried to rub off the remaining mud with her sleeve. There was a small gash at the top and a lever sticking out at the side. She tugged it experimentally. The object vibrated.

‘Goodbye hello,’ said the voice.

Ivy frowned and tugged the lever again. There was a giggle. Was she holding a bell? She ran her fingers round it once more. There was only one kind of bell she knew that was this shape. ‘You’re a bicycle bell . . .’ she realized.

She heard a laugh. ‘Yes, yes, found you. Your name’s Scratch. What’s mine?’

Ivy tried to make sense of what the bell was saying. ‘Um, my name’s Ivy. Do you mean that *your* name’s Scratch?’

The bell tinkled. ‘I do not mean what I mean, of course. Scratch got a back-to-fronted problem. Nice to Ivy meet you.’

A back-to-fronted problem? Ivy ran her thumb along the dent on Scratch’s top. Maybe the damage prevented him from speaking properly.

Suddenly a creak sounded above her head: someone was walking about in the shop, directly above her. She turned towards the hatch.

‘I’ve got to go,’ she told Scratch. ‘Sorry.’

‘Go, wait! Please Ivy take Scratch! Me don’t leavings here.’

‘Shh . . .’ Ivy didn’t want whoever was upstairs to hear her. She gazed down at Scratch; the warm, tingly sensation in her hand was stronger now, as if she could feel the bell’s desperation. ‘OK, fine, I’ll get you out of here,’ she decided, putting him in her pocket. ‘Just keep your voice down.’

Chapter Thirteen

Behind the House of Bells was a narrow alleyway that smelled of chicken soup and laundry powder. Bin bags were piled at the back doors of shops and dripping Hobsmatch garments hung from washing lines across the path.

Ivy looked in either direction but couldn't see movement. She was safe for the time being.

She paused, trying to decide what to do next. She was worried about what Ethel had said – both about the Dirge and Granma Sylvie's past life as a trader. Ivy didn't know if she should be happy or scared that she was an uncommoner. All she really felt was numb. More than ever, she wished her parents were there.

She tucked all these thoughts away in the back of her mind and tried to concentrate. The underguard station could be in any direction. She wondered if Scratch knew.

'Scratch, can you help me?' she whispered, taking the little bell out of her pocket. 'Do you know where the nearest underguard station is?'

'Of course saviour helping, Ivy.' Scratch shivered. 'Why go wantings to there?'

Ivy peered down at him as she deciphered what he was saying. His speech seemed to be a mixture of opposites and jumbled sentences. 'My brother's in there,' she explained. 'I have to rescue him.'

Scratch went very still. 'Oh.' After a moment he gave a shudder. 'I where know Uglies station, but getting not in you out.'

Uglies. That was one word for them. 'You know how to get there, but not how to get in or out?' she guessed.

Scratch tinkled.

'*Right*.' Ivy smiled, pleased she was getting the hang of his speech. She readjusted Granma Sylvie's bag around her shoulder. Judging from the underguard's conversation with Ethel, the streets were packed with people looking for her. She wasn't going to get anywhere without being spotted. 'I wonder if I can get another invisibility candle . . .' she murmured.

'Why one another?' Scratch asked her. 'Again and candle use again.'

Ivy went still. '*What . . . ?*' She unzipped her granma's handbag and fumbled blindly for the black candle. When she brought it out into the light, she could see that the wax had regrown. It was now at least half as big as when she'd first been given it. Hope rose up inside her belly, blooming like a flower.

'What direction for the underguard station?' she asked, blowing out the candle flame.

Scratch squeaked. 'This corner's round, then wrong.'

Ivy puzzled through his directions. *Round this corner, then right.* She squeezed him gently. 'Thank you.'

They wound their way through the back streets of the Gauntlet and emerged further up the main road, where a series of cutlery traders were demonstrating the properties of various spoons and forks. Ivy didn't stop to see what an uncommon ladle was capable of; instead, she clutched the invisibility candle to her chest and ducked through the crowd, dodging feet and elbows. As she crossed onto the cobbles, a shadow fell across her path and she looked up to find a tall white obelisk standing proudly in the middle of the road. At eye level was a brass plaque. Ivy stretched up to read it.

The Great Cavern Memorial
In loving memory of the gauntlet
traders who were killed in the
Great Battle against the Fallen Guild
Twelfth Night 1969

Ivy studied the names – at least thirty of them, if not more. She swallowed. It couldn't just be coincidence that the Great Battle had occurred on the same Twelfth Night that Granma Sylvie had disappeared.

As she continued towards the underguard station, she tried to work out how she might rescue Seb, but her thoughts kept slipping back to the Dirge and that crooked sixpence. If the Dirge had sent the *We can see you now* to Granma Sylvie, it meant they'd been searching for her all these years.

Scratch quivered in her pocket. ‘Ivy not almost far now there,’ he whispered. ‘Rounding of the corner.’

She made a sharp turn and then came to a halt. The street had opened out into a black marble courtyard filled with . . . Were those *gravestones*?

Ivy examined one nervously. It was engraved with a public notice:

UNCOMMON NEEDLES HAVE EYES.
ASK YOUR LOCAL OFFICER ABOUT NEEDLE CCTV;
IT’S PINPOINT ACCURATE!

The next one along read:

OBSERVE THE TRADING HOURS:
FIRST LIGHT TILL MIDNIGHT.
GUT LAW BREAKERS WILL BE TRACED AND PROSECUTED.

Ivy shuddered. It was eerily quiet. She regarded the surrounding buildings with their smooth granite walls and smoked-glass windows. If there was a design theme here, it was *darkness*. She could see only one set of doors in the entire square and these were iron, with a sign hanging from a hook above them. ‘That’s it?’ she asked, her voice cracking.

Scratch only shivered. Ivy didn’t blame him.

She made her way quickly across the courtyard, her wellies pattering over the marble floor. When she reached the station doors, she paused to read the sign hanging above:

FIRST COHORT UNDERGUARD HQ
COMMANDING OFFICER: LADY SELENA GRIMES, QUARTERMASTER DE

Ivy grasped the strap of Granma Sylvie’s handbag, trying to summon up some courage. She could hear the voices of her mum and dad in her head: *Come on, soldier, you can do this. We believe in you.* She swallowed the lump in her throat and pushed open the doors.

Ivy surveyed the interior of the underguard station with a deepening sense of horror. In addition to the expected underguards, she could see a skull-shaped vase filled with headless flower stems and a collection of large stone urns with the letters RIP etched on the front. There were thick black drapes hanging in the windows and a mahogany picture rail running around the walls from which dangled sepia photos of old bones. The smoke-filled air smelled of strange chemicals, whisky and furniture wax.

Ivy trembled as she went in. Fortunately there seemed to be plenty going on so one noticed when the front doors closed of their own accord.

A dark stone reception desk – unnervingly like a tomb – stood at the back of the room; on it was a black marble cherub holding a silver bell. Behind the desk, underguards in long dark cloaks swished about their business with feathers or toilet brushes.

Ivy felt Scratch shivering in her pocket as she scanned the far wall and counted three doors. The smoked-glass window of the one in the far right-hand corner was engraved with the word CELLS.

Ivy checked on the underguards as she snuck past them. It was still difficult to believe they didn't know she was there. *I'm invisible,* she repeated to herself. *I'm invisible.*

As she approached the door, she glanced back once more. Satisfied that the guards were all distracted, she reached for the handle.

Just in time, she heard it creak and leaped back—

The door burst open. Ivy ducked aside and pinned herself against the wall.

A willowy lady with sloping shoulders and a long neck came striding into the room. Her dark hair lay neatly plaited over her shoulder and she wore a floor-length grey silk dress with a purple sash across her chest, like some Roman emperor. 'There must be a mistake,' she said calmly. 'It can't be her.'

'I can assure you,' said a second voice, 'there is no mistake.'

Ivy identified the second voice instantly; her skin turned to ice as Officer Smokehart stopped right in front of her. He gestured to a framed picture behind the stone desk. 'The map doesn't make mistakes.'

Ivy scrutinized the picture curiously. Except . . . wait, it *wasn't* a picture; it *was* a map – she could see the image on its surface shimmering like a seashell. First it depicted a rugged coastline of white cliffs, then a patchwork of fields and rolling hills, and finally crisscrossing roads and concrete buildings. The map was *moving*.

Smokehart turned back to the tall woman. With her slanting blue eyes, thick lashes and high cheekbones, she looked a bit like a movie star.

Around her wrist was a thin leather leash; a small, sandy-haired dog sniffed around the bottom of her dress.

‘I’ve checked the records,’ Smokehart insisted. ‘Sylvie Wrench took the glove when she was eleven. She was visible on all uncommon maps after that date until Twelfth Night 1969, when she disappeared off the face of the planet. Our map hasn’t been able to find her for over forty years, but it *can* see her now. She appeared this morning.’

The tall woman lowered her head, thinking.

‘With your authority,’ Smokehart continued, ‘I will reopen the enquiry into Twelfth Night. Everyone knows what happened to Sylvie Wrench’s father, Octavius, but the movements of the rest of the family have always eluded us. If we can piece together what really happened that night, we might be able to discover the whereabouts of the three brothers and the mother, and bring them to justice. This is the first opportunity we’ve had to—’

The tall woman raised her hand, her blue eyes widening as she interrupted him. ‘This is the first opportunity we’ve had to stir up the past. Many uncommoners lost friends and family on Twelfth Night, fighting the Fallen Guild. Reopening the case is like baring old wounds. It is not a good idea.’

‘Selena, listen to me. We could make history—’

‘*Officer*,’ the woman said sharply. ‘You and I are colleagues, but please do not feel you have earned the right to address me as anything other than Lady Grimes. I am a *quartermaster*.’

Just for a second Smokehart’s pale face flushed scarlet and little red dots appeared on his neck. Ivy remembered that it had happened before, when he had been pursuing her in that rain-drenched field. He bowed his head. ‘Forgive me, Lady Grimes, but if you could just—’

Selena Grimes raised her hand again. ‘You said that Ms Wrench is confined to a common hospital, yes?’

Smokehart gritted his teeth. ‘Yes. She appeared on the map while travelling in an ambulance. I ascertained her address, and then, after my constable and I had searched her house, we went to the hospital to question her. Unfortunately the woman simply doesn’t know anything. Purposefully or not, her mind has been wiped.’

Ivy’s nostrils flared. How confused and scared Granma Sylvie must have been!

‘Then she is hardly going anywhere,’ Selena Grimes summarized. ‘Place her under twenty-four-hour guard and question her again in a few days’ time. Maybe whatever was used to wipe her memory was only temporary. There is no need to alarm the whole of Lundinor unless you have solid information *and* evidence.’

Smokehart grimaced. ‘This woman has concealed herself for years – that’s more than enough evidence to make her a suspect. I already have her grandson in custody. He may have valuable knowledge. I plan to start the interrogation immediately.’

Ivy’s chest tightened. *Seb* . . .

Selena’s mouth twitched. ‘*Officer*. While I admire your pursuit of justice, GUT law does not allow you to reprimand someone if they themselves are not under suspicion. If this boy is Ms Wrench’s grandson, then he is an uncommoner; he is one of us. You must release him and allow him to roam Lundinor freely.’

She turned, her long dress billowing at her side. ‘That is my final word. Oh, and I don’t want the press getting involved – there’ll be uproar.’ She looked fondly down at her dog. ‘Come along, little one.’

Smokehart followed as Selena Grimes swept towards the exit. His shoulders stiffened as the front door closed behind her with a thud.

Ivy gave a sigh of relief. She didn’t quite know what to make of that conversation but she did know one thing: Smokehart’s back was turned. This was her opportunity to sneak through to the cells, and she was going to take it.

The door opened into a gloomy slate-tiled corridor. Glass doors were set into the left-hand wall, each inscribed with a different underguard rank and name. Officer Smokehart had what appeared to be the largest room; a Sergeant Crabshorte was next, followed by a Sergeant Pike and a Constable Stormfront. On the opposite wall was a series of doors with only a small glass window at the top; a brown feather hovered outside at eye level.

Ivy approached the first cautiously.

‘Be not uncarefully,’ whispered Scratch. She felt him vibrating in her pocket and gave him an appreciative squeeze. When she was in front of the first feather, it began writing:

Prisoner 4

Name: ‘2 grade’ Lil
Crime: Fraud
Status: Awaiting sentence

Ivy peered through the glass and found a neon-lit square room beyond. A woman with scruffy red hair, in a tartan beret and football kit, was lying on a plastic bench, picking at her nails.

The next two cells were empty, and the one after that was filled with a strange green light that made Ivy feel dizzy.

‘Ghoul hole,’ Scratch explained in a tinkling whisper. ‘Cell for special uses with muckers. Losing of memory inside, so Lundinor being ever forgotten.’

Ivy shivered. So if a mucker went inside a ghoul hole, they lost their memory. Wow – uncommoners really did go the extra mile to keep Lundinor a secret. As she approached the next door, the feather began writing:

Prisoner 2
Name: Valian Kaye
Crime: Theft of a bell from Ethel Dread
Status: Investigation pending

Ivy gasped. *Valian*. She could see him sitting on the edge of the bench, rubbing his bare arms as if trying to warm himself. His mouth was a tight line. Ivy bit her lip. If he was in there, he must have been arrested earlier and not run away. She wondered if he’d really stolen a bell from Ethel. She wasn’t sure how she felt about him being locked up. Maybe he deserved it.

She shook her head. She didn’t have time to work it out. She was here for her brother. She moved on to the next cell. When she saw who was in there, her heart pounded.

Seb.

He was scrunched up in the corner, his knees tucked under his arms, the lead from his headphones creeping down his chest. His grey hood was hanging low over his eyebrows but Ivy could still see his face. There were dark circles under his eyes and a bloody scratch across his cheek.

He looks terrible. She ran her hand across the glass. She needed to get inside.

The feather swished around by her head.

Prisoner 3
Name: Unknown. Grandson of Sylvie Wrench
Crime:
Status: Awaiting interrogation

Ivy examined the cell door. There was no handle, but she saw a small opening that looked like a keyhole. With the invisibility candle in her left hand, Ivy got onto her knees to take a closer look.

There must be some way to get it open.

She did a quick inventory of her tools. Granma Sylvie’s handbag contained some bits of paper, a small packet of tissues, a silk scarf and a purse full of coins. The pockets in Valian’s jacket were all empty. The only thing left was the grubby piece of canvas she’d taken from the House of Bells.

Inside was the small paintbrush, hammer and the uncommon piece of string that had secured the canvas. She ran her fingers across them thoughtfully, wondering if they might be useful. She had no idea how to pick a lock; in movies people used hairpins or wire.

She grabbed the uncommon string, wondering what to do with it. The heat coming from it was especially ticklish, like warm pins and needles under her skin.

She swung it around experimentally in front of her, but nothing happened. Something about it tugged at the corners of her memory . . . She’d seen someone using it before . . .

Of course, she realized. *The puppeteer.*

She tied the string onto her middle finger, just as he’d done. Immediately the string started to move of its own accord, snaking through the air like a white cotton worm. Ivy directed it towards the lock, where it slipped inside.

She wiggled her finger slightly. She could feel the string turning inside, as if it was made of steel.

Click!

There was a deep groan and the door edged open. Ivy tugged the string out of the lock and leaped to her feet.

It worked! She couldn't believe it. She cast her eyes along the corridor to check that she was still alone, stuffed the string inside the canvas and hauled back the heavy cell door.

Seb was on his feet as she burst in. He ripped his headphones out of his ears.

'Seb!'

'*Ivy?* Where are you?' He swept back his hood, frowning as his eyes strained. 'Is this some kind of trick?'

Ivy thrust the invisibility candle into Granma Sylvie's handbag, hearing the flame crackle back to life. She watched the air around her shift for a second, and then Seb blinked.

'Ivy!' He rushed forward and grabbed her, pulling her close. His top smelled of damp sweat. 'I can't believe you're—! How did you—?'

She pushed him away. 'There's no time to explain now; we have to get out of here.'

Seb's face darkened. 'Yeah, I know.' He looked into the hallway. 'Are you on your own?'

Ivy winced. 'Not exactly.' She held the door open. 'Come on – we have to be quick.'

Just then, she heard the clack of footsteps in the corridor. 'Wait,' she whispered, shoving Seb back inside. She caught a flash of black cloak as she heaved on the cell door, leaving it ajar. Her heart was in her mouth as she waited for the footsteps to fade.

After a minute they both crept outside. Ivy checked for patrolling underguards. The place was empty.

'We've got to find a way back to the street,' she said. 'There must be a fire exit somewhere.' She dashed along the corridor, away from the reception. There was a sign on the wall pointing to the armoury, with the symbol of a toilet brush next to it. Ivy turned the other way, Seb hard on her heels.

'Mmmm hhmm mmm,' came a muffled voice.

'Ivy . . .' Seb whispered. 'Did you know that your pocket's moving?'

Ivy frowned and pulled Scratch out. 'Scratch, what's up?'

'Stables horses! Outing way through stables,' he said enthusiastically. 'Scratch outside from seen.'

Seb's jaw dropped. 'Ivy, did that thing just—?'

Ivy grabbed his sweatshirt. 'It doesn't matter. Look for the stables – *now*!'

Seb began checking every door. Ivy hurried after him, trying to guess where the stables might be. Ahead, the passage split in two. There was no time to check both – Ivy thought she heard approaching footsteps. She took a sniff and tugged Seb's arm, pulling him down the left-hand passage; the air smelled fresher in that direction. Soon she could hear thuds behind the wall and then, just once, the thrilling noise of a horse neighing.

'We must be close,' she said. 'There!'

Her spirits soared as she spotted a set of double doors with smoked-glass windows. Through them, she could make out a dark hall with a high ceiling and a row of shadowy stables on either side. On the wall was a set of flashing silver horseshoes. Above them, a sign read: lightning lucky horseshoes. An archway at the opposite end of the hall led out onto a road lit by streetlamps.

Ivy hissed. 'The exit's there – I can see it!'

Seb was at her shoulder. 'Ivy, wait. What if the door's alarmed?'

Ivy glanced at the large conch shell mounted on the wall above it. 'We'll just have to make a run for it anyway. I know where we're going when we get outside.' She could only think of one place where they might be safe. 'Ethel's. I'll show you . . .' She pushed the steel bar on the door. It creaked but wouldn't budge.

Seb came to help, but it was no good. His face flushed. 'It must be jammed.'

'What?' Ivy puffed. 'Someone will come along at any moment, I just know it.' She thought of using the uncommon string again, but this door had no keyhole. 'We don't have time.'

She felt Scratch trembling. 'Gloves uncommon what you needed.'

Seb drew back. 'Seriously, you're OK with that thing talking? It's creepy.'

Ivy ignored him. *Uncommon gloves.* She remembered what Gilbert Grandiose had said in his shop: *Uncommon gloves are the keys to all Lundinor.* Maybe they were literally like keys; maybe they opened doors . . .

'He's right,' she decided. 'We need an uncommon glove to open it.'

Seb jerked his head back. 'Wait – you understand what it said?'

Ivy stared back at him.

‘OK. Well, where do we get those from?’ he asked.

Ivy could only think of one possibility. When she told Seb, he exclaimed, ‘No way! Absolutely not! That guy is the whole reason we’re down here. We can’t trust him.’

Ivy knew they didn’t have a choice.

Valian rose from his bench slowly, his eyebrows raised. ‘You’ve got to be joking. You two? *You* got inside this place?’

Ivy couldn’t help flashing him a smug smile but it lasted barely seconds. ‘There’s no time,’ she said. ‘We need you to open the stable door.’

Seb grunted in agreement, but didn’t seem happy.

Looking slightly dazed, Valian grabbed his leather jacket from Ivy as he sauntered out of his cell. His shoulders relaxed as soon as he’d put it on. Following behind, Ivy wondered whether she and Seb had done the right thing in freeing him, or if they’d live to regret it.

At least her idea worked: when they made their way back to the stables, the door sprang open easily to Valian’s gloved touch.

Soon they were out on the road, heading for Ethel’s. Ivy couldn’t quite believe their luck.

Chapter Fourteen

They fell through the front door of the House of Bells like three skittles.

‘Valian!’ Ethel shouted as soon as she saw him. ‘Ivy! Sebastian . . . ?’

Ivy shoved Valian off her and struggled to her feet. She was surprised that Valian had followed them all the way, especially after what she’d read on his cell.

Seb got up and brushed the hair out of his eyes, puffing hard. Ivy wasn’t sure if he was out of breath because of the run or because of what he’d seen in the streets. She guessed the underguard hadn’t exactly given him a tour of Lundinor on the way to the station. She had a lot of explaining to do. So much had happened in such a short space of time.

He looked warily at Ethel and whispered down to Ivy, ‘How does that lady know our names?’

Ivy narrowed her eyes. ‘I don’t know . . .’ She was quite sure she hadn’t told Ethel her name before she escaped earlier.

‘I traced Sylvie’s position using a map of mine,’ Ethel said, locking the front door. ‘I spoke to ’er ’alf an hour ago.’

‘You’ve spoken to Granma?’ Seb repeated.

That explains it, then, Ivy thought. Her stomach clenched as she remembered that Granma Sylvie had been visited by Smokehart. ‘How is she?’

Ethel sighed. ‘Bloody terrified, I should say. She’s had God knows who down there this morning, trying to prise answers out of ’er.’ She looked them both up and down, wiping dust off Ivy’s shoulder and frowning at Seb’s grazed face. ‘Your gran’s reappearance ’as started something,’ she said in an ominous tone. ‘Something that involves the Dirge. A lot of people may be in danger. I ’ave to see Sylvie and work out what’s going on. And you’re both coming with me. It’s too risky to let you out of my sight.’

Ivy could feel the relief washing over her. ‘We’re going to see Granma Sylvie?’ She didn’t think she’d ever wanted to see her granma so much in all her life. And it was evening by now – her mum and dad might be at the hospital too.

Seb looked from one to the other. ‘Er – you might have forgotten, but I’ve just been locked in a cell for three hours,’ he said sharply, turning to Ethel. ‘So who are you and how do you know Granma?’

Ethel placed a hand on Ivy’s shoulder. ‘Looks like you’ve got a tale to tell. Best go out the back for it.’ She looked sternly in Valian’s direction. ‘This one and I ’ave business to discuss.’

Ivy was happy to leave the shop floor for the quiet of the storeroom, and for the chance to talk to Seb alone. She returned the canvas, hammer, string and paintbrush to Ethel’s shelves and then got out the photo of Granma Sylvie and Ethel. ‘Remember this?’

Seb’s eyes widened. ‘Whoa . . .’ He dropped onto the piano stool in the corner of the room. ‘No way. That’s her. That’s Ethel.’

Ivy sat down opposite him and told him what she’d learned in the last few hours.

‘I don’t know if . . .’ Seb put his face in his hands. ‘Do you really believe that uncommon objects contain part of someone’s’ – he tapped his chest – ‘you know?’

Ivy nodded as she passed Scratch to him. ‘I know it sounds weird, but it’s true. How else do you explain it?’ She watched carefully as Seb picked up the bicycle bell. There was no reaction. ‘All uncommon bells can talk,’ Ivy said. ‘I think Scratch speaks funny because he got damaged.’

Seb gingerly turned the bell over, holding it a distance away, as if it might explode at any moment. Scratch giggled. ‘Do you think he can see?’ Seb asked. ‘It’s not like he has eyes.’

‘Scratch hearing you can,’ Scratch whirred. ‘Scratch seeing can also. Eyes don’t need seeing to.’

Seb jumped. ‘Uh – here, you have him back.’ He leaned over and dropped Scratch into Ivy’s lap.

She chuckled as she put Scratch back into the handbag. She caught Seb giving her a sidelong glance: the same list of questions was running through his mind as was running through hers. There was so much they needed to talk about – but for the moment she was just glad to sit quietly with him. She'd missed him, she realized. She wouldn't tell him that, obviously. But she had.

The silence was slowly broken by voices in the front of the shop. Valian and Ethel.

'What do you mean *every waking moment*?' Valian snapped. 'I'm not following them everywhere.'

'Oh yes you are,' Ethel replied. 'They don't know nothing about the Trade. They'll be eaten alive down 'ere. You're a scout. You're street-smart by nature and they need someone to protect 'em.'

Valian sighed. Ivy could hear him pacing. 'And if I do this, you'll drop the charges? Immediately?'

'Gone,' Ethel said simply. 'But I want the bell returned, mind you.'

There was a long pause. Ivy looked at Seb. She could tell that he didn't trust Valian either. He obviously *had* stolen that bell.

'If you shake,' Ethel said, 'then this is a binding deal. Your glove is your word.'

'I know,' Valian groaned. 'Let's just get it over with.'

When Ivy and Seb left the storeroom, they found the atmosphere in the shop like ice. Valian was looking out of the window into the street, his arms folded. Ethel was sitting at her desk, tapping a feather on the table top, staring into space.

'Company's here,' Valian announced.

Ethel turned to Ivy. 'Yes – nice to see you both again. Everything sorted?'

Ivy shrugged non-committally; she heard Seb murmur something under his breath.

'No, no,' Valian said. 'I didn't mean *them*.' He stepped away from the front door as it sprang open, a black cloud rushing in.

The desk bell shouted, '*Officer Smokehart of the First Cohort of—*' Ethel laid her hand on top to silence it.

Ivy inched backwards. *Smokehart*.

'What in the name of the dead do you think you are doing, Ms Dread?' His voice boomed around the room, making all the bells shake. They started whispering feverishly.

'Harbouring criminals?' he continued. 'Deceiving officers? There's two charges right there.' He thumped his fist into his other hand as he marched in, followed by two constables, neither of whom Ivy recognized.

Smokehart scowled at her and Seb, and pointed a long gloved finger at Valian. ‘And you must have aided their escape. Don’t think I won’t add it to your list of charges, boy.’

Valian took a step towards Smokehart, but the two constables blocked his path.

Ethel rose from her seat. She was only a wisp of a woman, and yet when she spoke, she sounded huge. ‘You will do no such thing!’ she exclaimed. ‘I’ve dropped the charges against ’im. It was a mistake. There was no missing bell.’ She swept out from behind her desk and walked right up to Smokehart.

Ivy tensed.

‘No one in this room ’as done anything wrong, *Officer*,’ Ethel insisted. ‘I suggest, seeing as this is private property, that you kindly leave!’ She jabbed a finger into Smokehart’s chest. The bells on the walls gasped.

Smokehart stiffened as Ethel touched him and his face became speckled with red dots. Ivy was becoming more and more familiar with the reaction, even though she didn’t know why it happened. ‘Ms Dread,’ the underguard said. ‘You are treading a fine line. You do not want to make an enemy of the law.’

Ethel stood a little straighter. ‘Prove it, then,’ she said. ‘Prove the crimes against ’em, if you can. If not, then clear off – or I’ll be featherwriting to Lady Grimes about you.’

Smokehart tightened his fists. Ivy could hear the squeak of his leather gloves. ‘Let me be clear about one thing,’ he said, his voice sharp. ‘I will get to the bottom of what happened to Sylvie Wrench and the rest of her godforsaken family on Twelfth Night. And you’ – he gestured at the four of them – ‘*none* of you will stand in my way!’ With that, he stormed out, his constables hurrying behind.

When he was gone – and only when he was gone – Ethel’s shoulders crumpled and she gave a big sigh. Valian opened his mouth.

‘You can keep your comments to yourself,’ she barked, pointing at him.

Ivy gazed over at the front door. ‘What’s Smokehart’s problem?’ she wondered.

Ethel shook her head. ‘Smokehart loves the law above all else. There is no good or bad with him, there are just law-abiders and law-breakers. It blinds him.’ She signalled to the door. ‘Come on, all of you – we’ve got to get to Bletchy Scrubb.’

Valian sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. ‘Where the hell is *Bletchy Scrubb*?’

‘In the common world,’ Seb declared cheerfully, slapping him on the back. ‘You know – the place where carpets stay on the floor and gloves just keep your hands warm and stuff.’

Chapter Fifteen

‘Not again,’ Seb moaned as he looked down at the large bag that Ethel had opened on the floor. The material was thick and tufty, covered in a flowery print. Ivy thought it looked suspiciously like carpet, but she didn’t want to say anything in case she offended Ethel.

The thought that she would soon see Granma Sylvie warmed Ivy’s insides, but she still sighed as she got down on her knees: she remembered how confused she’d felt crawling through Valian’s suitcase the last time. She thought about shrinking again. ‘Isn’t there another way out of here?’

Ethel threw a tasselled pashmina over her shoulder. ‘There are other ways in *an’* out,’ she said, ‘but not for you. Uncommoners ’ave to ’ave taken the glove at least a year ago to travel via uncommon rug, and everything else requires a licence, for which you need to pass a test.’ She ushered Ivy forward.

‘But why?’ Ivy asked. ‘Surely if I can do this, I can—’

Ethel rolled her eyes. ‘Dontcha think it’d look a bit suspicious to a mucker if they saw someone riding an uncommon vacuum cleaner over Blackheath?’ She pursed her lips. ‘You need special training to use uncommon objects outside of undermarts. That’s left to Special Branch. They’re underguard whose entire job it is to ’ide Lundinor from common eyes. It’s for commoners own good, of course. Clements knows the kind of chaos there’d be if everyone started using uncommon objects willy-nilly.’ She laid a hand on Ivy’s back. ‘Now no more questions. Let’s go!’

Bletchy Scrubb hospital was lit up like a giant doll’s house against the black sky. Ivy could almost peek into every room, where the greenish lights illuminated a doctor typing at a desk, or a hurrying nurse, or a hallway dotted with staff. The car park was emptier than it had been that morning. Ivy brushed herself down as Ethel rubbed soothing circles on

Seb's back: he already looked nauseous. In the shadows beside them, Valian slunk out of Ethel's bag and snapped it shut behind him.

'Just take some deep breaths,' Ethel advised Seb. 'The feeling should fade after a few minutes.'

Seb frowned at her, his mouth pinched shut. Ivy was glad he couldn't see Valian grinning over his shoulder.

As they approached the main entrance, Ivy looked around. There were people going in and out, smoking in huddled groups or heading for the car park. The night air was still. Ivy could hear the drone of distant traffic.

She remembered the man in grey. 'I'm pretty sure there was an uncommoner here this morning,' she told the others. 'He was acting oddly and his hands were all shrivelled and rotten.' She saw Ethel give Valian an anxious glance. 'That means he must have made an illegal trade, doesn't it?'

Ethel pursed her lips. 'For 'ands to get that damaged you'd 'ave to make lots of illegal trades. Very illegal ones. Mem—' She hesitated. 'Members of the Dirge were known to do it on purpose, as a mark of loyalty.'

Ivy had already guessed that the man in grey was looking for Granma Sylvie; it made even more sense if he was a member of the Dirge.

As they went into the hospital, Ethel got out a piece of paper and glanced at it. 'It's ward six B.'

Ivy tried to picture the man in grey again. She hadn't seen his face because of his hat, but she remembered the way he moved: stealthy and quick. Calculated.

While Ethel went to ask a nurse for directions, she whispered to Seb, 'What if the man in grey was a member of the Dirge? What if he was the one who stole Granma Sylvie's notes? That way, he'd have seen her address and . . .' She shuddered. 'Maybe he went straight to her house and searched it while we were on the bus?'

Seb had his mobile phone in his hand. He shoved it back in his pocket and rubbed his neck. For a second Ivy thought he was going to tell her she was being paranoid again, but he only shook his head.

As Ethel came back with instructions, Ivy looked around, searching for signs of uncommoners. Through an open door she caught sight of an elderly lady unpacking a small suitcase. Ivy blinked, realizing that she was half expecting the woman to crawl inside and disappear.

Seb must have noticed, because he gave her a nudge. ‘We’re in the common world now, remember,’ he told her. ‘Everything’s back to normal.’

Ivy felt a twinge of disappointment. *Normal isn’t always best*. Using the invisibility candle *had* been pretty awesome.

For a moment she imagined how different her life might have been if her granma’s amnesia had never happened. She might have grown up knowing about Lundinor, knowing just how amazing the world really was.

They found Granma Sylvie sitting up in bed in a private room; her white-blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders and her soft cheeks were pale. ‘Ivy,’ she croaked. ‘Sebastian.’ She held open her arms and smiled.

Ivy was shocked to see her looking so weak. It was as if she’d been sick for days. She noticed a plaster cast on one hand; on the other, a patch of white sticky tape held a thin tube in place.

‘I’m so sorry,’ her granma said as they drew closer. ‘I’m *so* sorry.’

Ivy’s vision blurred as she hugged her carefully. ‘This is all my fault,’ Granma Sylvie whispered.

Ivy stepped back; Seb eyed Valian suspiciously before pecking his granma on the cheek.

‘Are either of you hurt?’ She inspected them closely.

‘I’m OK,’ Ivy said, wiping away a tear before her granma noticed. She didn’t want to make her feel worse. Seb just shrugged.

‘What about you?’ Ivy asked. ‘Is it just your wrist that’s broken?’

‘Yes – my hip’s only bruised, thank goodness,’ Granma Sylvie replied.

‘Sylv?’ At the end of the bed, Ethel cleared her throat. She took off her flowery headscarf, and her spiky black hair sprang up. Ivy got a flash of the mischievous, daring young woman she had once been; it was easy to understand why Granma Sylvie had been friends with her.

Granma Sylvie blinked, staring at Ethel like she was a ghost. Tears appeared in the corner of her eyes. ‘I don’t remember your face,’ she said softly. ‘I’m sorry, Ethel. It’s only your voice that’s familiar.’

Ethel nodded slowly and steadied herself against the bed. ‘That’s OK,’ she said, as cheerfully as she could, though Ivy could tell that she was hurt. ‘It’s not all goin’ to come back right away.’

Granma Sylvie brought a hand up to her face, rubbing her temples. ‘I wish it would; everything feels so out of reach.’ She turned to Ivy and Seb. ‘When I returned from surgery, my head felt fuzzy and was full of strange images – words, faces and names – nothing that made any sense. I thought they were hallucinations caused by these painkillers they've got me on. That was until I got a phone call from Ethel.'

Ivy glanced over at her. 'A phone call?'

'I thought in the circumstances featherlight mail might be a bit scary,' Ethel explained with a shrug.

Granma Sylvie continued. 'Now I think the images must be memories.'

Ivy thought how strange it must be to have memories of Lundinor come flooding back after forty years.

'The amnesia is fading – just incredibly slowly . . .' Granma Sylvie frowned at Ethel. 'Everything is still mostly blank. There are some memories that seem stronger, a particular pattern my mind keeps returning to, over and over, though I can't make sense of it. First I see a woman with sad blue eyes, and then I hear the trickle of water followed by the sound of creaking gates. Then, finally, there's this big old house full of dark faces.'

Ivy had a sudden thought. She rummaged through Granma Sylvie's handbag for the old photo. Maybe it would help jog her memory.

She opened the inside pocket – and the hairs on the back of her hand stood on end as she came across something that felt unnaturally warm. Her cheeks flushed.

She wriggled her fingers around until they found a thin curved object; it felt like it had just been under a heat lamp. As Ivy brought it out into the glare of the hospital lights, she gasped, realizing what it was.

'Your bracelet, Granma Sylvie!' she exclaimed. 'It's uncommon.' Everyone looked at her. 'I mean, er – it must be, mustn't it?'

Ethel assessed her suspiciously. 'Give it here,' she said.

Ivy handed over the half-bangle. Ethel made a quick inspection, then passed it to Valian. 'You ever seen anything like that before?' she asked him.

Seb coughed. 'That's Valian, by the way, Granma,' he said, pointing a thumb at him. 'He's with Ethel, not us.'

Valian scowled at him, then turned to Granma Sylvie, who nodded back.

Ivy racked her brains while Valian examined the piece of bangle. 'Earlier,' she said, 'in the underguard station, I overheard a conversation between Smoke-hart and this woman . . . er – Selena something, I can't remember.'

Valian raised his eyebrows. 'Selena *something*? Ha! Don't let anyone hear you say that back in Lundinor. Her name's Selena Grimes. She's one of the four great quartermasters of Lundinor. They're the most powerful people in any undermart.'

Seb glared at him. 'Big deal. Go on, Ivy.'

'Well, Smokehart said that Granma Sylvie appeared on his uncommon map while she was travelling in an ambulance. It must have been when the bracelet was cut off?'

Her granma sat up straighter. 'Of course.' She beamed at Ivy, then looked at the piece of bracelet in Valian's hands. 'All these years I kept it on because it was the only part of me that was whole after the accident. I had no idea what it was.'

Ivy's insides turned heavy as she realized how Granma Sylvie was feeling. It must be like finding out that your favourite possession was a fake, or being deceived by a best friend.

'Must have some sort of memory-wipe ability,' Valian deduced, turning the bracelet over in his fingers. 'The underguard use uncommon whistles to wipe people's memories, but that's permanent. Maybe the bracelet only does it while you're wearing it.'

Ethel gave the object a sidelong glance. 'It didn't just hide your memories, though, Sylv. It hid *you*. That's what its real use is. No one can hide from the underguards when they've taken the glove. *No one.* You were the first ever to do it.'

'And the rest of our family . . .' Ivy added, though it felt strange to say *our*. But they were her family too, as well as Granma Sylvie's. She wondered what her mum and dad would make of it all. Her dad especially – he had uncles now. 'They all disappeared on Twelfth Night, your mum and dad and your three brothers,' she finished. She noticed Ethel and Valian shifting uncomfortably and wondered if they knew more than they were letting on. Before she could ask them, Seb raised his voice.

'Damn it. Where *are* they?' He stared down at his mobile phone screen before looking up again. 'I've been checking ever since we got here, but there's still no text or voicemail from Mum or Dad. Didn't Dad say he'd be here by now?'

Ivy checked the clock on the wall. It was eight-thirty. 'Yeah . . . he should be. And I thought Mum would arrive before him. Did they leave a message with any of the nurses?'

Granma Sylvie shrugged. ‘Not that anyone’s told me.’

The room fell quiet. Ivy studied her feet, going through the possibilities in her head. When she looked up again, she saw that the others were looking anxious.

‘You don’t think—’ Before Seb had finished speaking, a jet-black feather appeared out of nowhere and hovered in front of his face. He tried to swat it away but it dodged his hand, flew over the middle of the bed and started writing:

> *You have something that is valuable to us.*
> *Now we have those who are most valuable to you.*
> *You have two days to give us what we want.*
> *The clock is ticking.*

The feather evaporated in a tiny cloud of black smoke, and in the same spot an alarm clock appeared and bounced onto the bed with a soft thud.

For a moment Ivy stood there, dumbstruck. Then she turned to Ethel, whose face looked like it had been drained of blood. She poked the clock, turning it over so she could see the front: the bells were spotted with rust, the glass dusty. The clock face was yellowed, painted with Roman numerals, and the black hands, each as thin as a spider’s leg, pointed to just after midnight.

‘Black hands . . .’ Valian murmured.

‘What did that—?’ Ivy gasped. ‘I mean, who was it?’

Seb suddenly grabbed the clock. ‘Ivy, I can see Mum in it . . . and Dad.’ She stepped closer and took hold of it too.

Within seconds, heat was shooting through her fingers; anguished voices echoed in her ears – cries of pain. She grimaced, trying not to drop the thing. Holding an uncommon object had never hurt like that before; like it was going to burn her. ‘It’s uncommon,’ she exclaimed. ‘What does it do?’

Granma Sylvie tried to reach out towards her. ‘Ivy, be careful. Ethel – should they be holding that?’

Ivy looked at the glass front. Her freckled face with its wide pale-green eyes and stubby lashes stared back at her. A voice whispered her name: *Ivy* . . . *Ivy* . . .

Slowly the faces of her mum and dad appeared in the glass before her. After a moment their reflections changed. The shadows under their cheekbones darkened and their skin withered as if they were starving. It was happening to Ivy's reflection too – she watched the whites of her eyes yellow and her thick hair wilt and fall out. Her hands shook, making the image blur. 'What's happening?'

Ethel leaned across the bed. 'Put it down, Ivy. It's meant to scare you.'

'It's choking me!' Seb cried. 'The hands – they're strangling me! Dad too – and Mum! We're dying! I'm watching us all die!' He let go of the clock, stumbling back.

Ivy looked into the clock face and swallowed. Her skin had now rotted away completely and her eyeballs had disappeared, leaving two dark holes brimming with squirming maggots. As she watched, the delicate black minute hand of the clock reshaped itself into a chain and wrapped itself around the reflection of her dad's decaying neck. Before long, the hour hand had choked her mum, who shriveled to a skeleton.

Ivy dropped the clock, the burning sensation disappearing immediately. The noises coming from the clock were silent.

Panting, she looked from Ethel to Valian. 'What *was* that?' she asked again. She felt like she'd just watched a scene from a horror movie. 'What just happened? Where are Mum and Dad?'

Ethel picked the clock up by one of the rusty bells and held it gingerly out in front of her. 'Uncommon alarm clocks are used as fortune tellers,' she explained, her voice full of disgust. 'Depending on the grade, they can predict anything from a thunderstorm to the age you're gonna lose your eyesight. This one, 'owever, has black 'ands and that only means one thing . . .'

Ivy shivered. She had a horrible feeling she knew what was coming.

'Uncommoners call it being dealt the "hands of fate",' Valian finished. His face was serious. 'This alarm clock counts down to the date of someone's death.'

'Are you saying that Mum and Dad . . . ?' Seb shook his head. 'There's got to be some mistake. Are the clocks ever wrong?'

Ethel rubbed her chin. ‘Wrong? No. As long as the ’ands remain black, then your fate is sealed. But the clock reads the future. If you change the future, then the clock will change too.’

Ivy saw that her granma was trembling beneath the covers. She laid a hand on her arm; it was covered in goose pimples. ‘Who sent it?’ Granma Sylvie asked Ethel.

Ivy didn’t wait for Ethel to reply. She already knew the answer. ‘The Dirge,’ she said. The name seemed to hang in the air. ‘The black feathers, the coin, the *We can see you now* – it’s them, isn’t it? They *are* back.’

Ethel lowered her eyes. Valian’s expression was grim.

‘Hang on,’ Seb said, exasperated. ‘Ivy told me that the Dirge were never seen again after Twelfth Night 1969.’

‘They weren’t,’ Valian said, in a cold voice. ‘Everyone believed they’d gone for good.’

Ethel nodded, her face pale. ‘Except now, I think that was just a foolish hope. Somewhere in the world, one of the Dirge must ’ave been waiting for you to reappear, Sylv. As for what you ’ave that’s of value to ’em, I don’t know.’

She looked out of the window into the dark winter evening. ‘One thing’s clear: wherever the Dirge fled after Twelfth Night 1969, in whichever parts of the world they’ve been hiding, your reappearance may ’ave just given them the incentive to come together again.’

Chapter Sixteen

Valian paced up and down at the foot of Granma Sylvie's bed. Seb had collapsed into a chair, looking drained, while Ivy curled up next to Granma Sylvie, tucking a hand through her good arm.

'If the Dirge are about to re-form,' Ethel said darkly, 'then many people are in danger, not just the ones in Lundinor. Years ago, rumour 'ad it that the Dirge wanted to use uncommon technology to control the entire common world. Taking your parents may be just the beginning. We 'ave to do something.'

'We have to track them down,' Valian said sharply. 'All five of them. I always knew they'd never really disbanded. They've been here all the time, lurking in the shadows.' There was a flicker of something in his eyes – hysteria, maybe, Ivy wasn't sure.

'It's not about *them,*' Seb retorted. 'Our *parents* have been taken! We need to find them.' He looked helplessly at Ethel. 'Can't you – you know, use something uncommon?'

Ethel sighed. 'It's not that simple, love, I'm afraid.'

Seb dropped his head into his hands. The sarcasm was gone. Ivy realized that he was in the same state of panic and desperation as her. She tried to think. 'The black feather wrote: *You have something that is valuable to us*,' she reminded everyone. 'Does anyone know what the Dirge are talking about?'

Valian shook his head. Ethel shrugged. 'It could be anything. The Dirge did everything in secret. No one knew any of their real plans. It was all rumour and speculation.'

Granma Sylvie sighed. 'It's useless me trying to remember. I have no idea.'

Ethel reached for the uncommon alarm clock again. 'By the looks of this you've got till the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve to get an idea,' she said, not unkindly.

Two days to change the future, Ivy thought. That was it.

‘We need a plan,’ Ethel went on. ‘There’s no use moping around ’ere, the three of you, trying to figure it out. We need answers and there’s only one place we’re gonna get those.’ She straightened, her hands on her hips. For the second time that day Ivy got the impression of a formidable woman; a warrior, with the battle lines drawn on her face to prove it. ‘Ivy, Seb? You’re coming back to Lundinor with me. I ’ave old friends there – people I trust – you can stay with them.’

Seb looked at Ivy. ‘I’m not so sure that’s a good idea. We don’t fit in there. Won’t we be in more danger?’

‘There’ll be no arguments about it,’ Ethel insisted. ‘If your parents ’ave been kidnapped by the Dirge, you’re not going to save them from this hospital room. Besides, who’s gonna protect you ’ere?’

Ivy snuggled closer to Granma Sylvie. She didn’t want to leave her again, she really didn’t. *But Ethel was right.* They couldn’t just hang around the hospital for two days waiting to see if Granma Sylvie remembered anything. Her mum and dad were going to die if they didn’t act.

Her granma frowned. ‘I – I don’t know . . .’

Ethel gestured around the room. ‘You’re safe ’ere, Sylv. The underguard ’ave already been to question you and left with nothing. The Dirge won’t come after you again until the deadline’s up.’

Granma Sylvie put a hand on Ivy’s shoulder. ‘If only I could remember . . .’ She sniffed and wiped her eyes. ‘What have I done? What *did* I do?’

Ivy’s spirits continued to plummet. Ethel and Valian were looking at each other bleakly; whatever they were thinking, it wasn’t good. Ivy had to hope she could save her mum and dad by working out what it was the Dirge wanted from Granma Sylvie. The trouble was, she didn’t have a clue where to start.

She glanced over at Seb. Sometimes, when she was upset or worried, she’d look at her mum or dad and all her worries would just fade away.

Seb’s head was lowered. Ivy couldn’t see his eyes – but it didn’t matter because she had already noticed the two dark patches that had formed on his jeans. He was crying.

Chapter Seventeen

Ivy rolled her shoulders back and groaned. Her whole body was still sore from yesterday’s bike crash, and the lumpy mattress she was laying on only made things worse. She looked around at the walls of an unfamiliar bedroom. There was a single window draped with spotty yellow curtains, and an empty fireplace set between two wardrobes painted in peeling duck-egg blue.

Only the chimney breast had been wallpapered – a thick white paper veined with hundreds of different fold-lines. As Ivy watched, one corner of the paper peeled away from the wall with a loud crumpling sound and folded over into a triangle. She sat up in bed, looking on with wide eyes as the rest of the wallpaper did the same, lifting and folding, crimping and twirling. Ivy had once seen a boy at school do origami, but it had never looked this fast or intricate. In the end, the paper had rearranged itself into a vase of huge white orchids perched on the mantelpiece.

‘Whoa . . .’ Ivy whispered. Impressed didn’t even cover it.

‘You’re awake then?’ Seb asked from above her.

‘I’m awake,’ she called, yawning. They were in bunk beds. Ivy had a vague recollection of climbing some creaking wooden stairs and being escorted into the bedroom by Ethel and a kind man with a doughy face and blue eyes.

‘I’ve been awake for an hour, listening to music,’ Seb continued. ‘Couldn’t get back to sleep. And it’s not just because this mattress seems to be filled with marbles. I can’t stop thinking about Mum and Dad . . .’

Ivy’s stomach turned over. For a second – for a tiny blissful second – she’d forgotten about the Dirge and the parent-napping. Her heart sank as she saw her duffel coat hanging over the back of a chair by the bed; on the cushion was Granma Sylvie’s handbag, Scratch and the uncommon alarm clock.

She let her head fall back against the pillow as the vision of her parents' decaying faces swirled in front of her eyes.

The bunk bed creaked. Ivy watched Seb's legs swing over the edge, and then he landed with a thud on the polished floorboards. 'I've been thinking,' he said. 'That thing the Dirge want . . . it must be something Granma had before she disappeared on Twelfth Night 1969, so we have to find out more about her life when she was here.'

'Ethel was her closest friend,' Ivy reminded him, 'but even she doesn't know what they're after, so . . .'

'So we'll have to do some digging,' Seb decided. 'There must be other traders here who knew Granma.'

Ivy looked closely at her brother. There were dark circles around his bloodshot eyes, and after the rain yesterday, his thick blond hair was a mass of bedraggled curls.

'We're Mum and Dad's only hope, Ivy.' He grabbed a towel hanging over the end of the bunk bed. 'I'm gonna go wash my face. Let's start as soon as you're ready.'

There was a small bathroom leading off the bedroom. While Seb was getting ready, Ivy sat on the edge of her bed, thinking. So much had happened yesterday that she hadn't had time to address what was going on with *her*. She picked up Scratch and gazed at him. Her palms tingled pleasantly.

'Scratch,' she whispered. 'I need to ask you something.'

Scratch stirred. 'Ivy mornings.' He sounded as if he was yawning. 'Helpings Scratch can will.'

'Do uncommon objects ever feel . . . warm at all? Kind of like body temperature.'

'Guessings the object what depends it. Normal to no.'

Ivy bit her lip. 'It's just . . . Whenever I touch something that's uncommon, it feels warm, like it's been left out in the sun; and then the feeling spreads and starts to tickle . . . And then sometimes, if I concentrate really hard, I kind of' – she hesitated – 'hear voices coming from it . . .'

Scratch was still. 'Ivy,' he said quietly. 'Scratch meanings to know.' He turned warmer, vibrating strongly in her hands.

'What is it?' She could sense his fear. 'It's OK, Scratch. You can tell me.'

The bell spoke softly. ‘Ivy beings a . . . a *whisperer*.’

‘A what?’

‘A whisperer.’ Scratch sounded terrified. ‘Whispering gift of sensing soul a part trapped inside.’

He fell silent for a moment. How strange it must be for him, she thought; after all, *he* was uncommon. She tried to still her hands, but she was too overwhelmed. Whispering seemed like a very dangerous gift; a gift she hadn’t asked for. ‘Do you know anything else about it? Like, can I turn it off?’

Scratch quivered. ‘Strong must beings Ivy’s whispering, voices hearing because only if strong. But . . . Scratch does understandings not enough: whispering beings impossible to children.’

Ivy tried to decipher what Scratch was saying. He was talking fast, sounding nervous, which made it more difficult for her to understand. ‘Whisperers are normally adults, then?’

‘Yes’s. Running it through family normals. Bad things to whisperers happen long ago.’

‘Bad things?’ Ivy asked uneasily.

‘Whisperers forcing to work,’ Scratch said. ‘Chased whisperers throughout history. Must be whisperers quiet.’

Ivy held her breath. Being a whisperer sounded like more of a curse than a blessing. She would have to be careful who she told. Before she could ask Scratch any more, Seb burst through the door.

‘Bathroom’s free,’ he said, swinging a towel over his shoulder. He was wearing a fresh hoodie and jeans, and his trainers had been cleaned. Ethel must have been back to Granma Sylvie’s house and picked them up last night.

‘I hope you actually washed,’ Ivy said with a frown. He never did at home. His bedroom always smelled of sweat.

Seb threw the towel at her bed. ‘I hope you can actually reach the basin, titch.’

Valian was waiting on the landing when they emerged from their room. Against the light from the second-floor window, his slim, black silhouette looked like a ninja. Ivy saw that he was scowling.

‘You’re still here?’ Seb grunted. ‘Aren’t there some other people you can go and annoy?’

Ivy headed towards the stairs. ‘He has to be here,’ she said.

‘Don’t think I don’t have better things to do with my time than babysit you losers,’ Valian muttered, following them. ‘But I shook on it with Ethel, so I have to be your bodyguard till the end of trade. *Every waking moment*, she said. Brilliant.’

Seb looked at him. ‘Do you see us bringing out the party poppers?’

Ivy gritted her teeth. Valian was going to get in the way of their digging, and besides, she didn’t trust him. The way his eyes had lit up yesterday when they’d been talking about the Dirge . . . Just the thought made her skin crawl.

As they went downstairs, Ivy stuffed her hands into her empty coat pockets. She’d left Granma Sylvie’s cumbersome handbag and all its contents in the bedroom, along with the uncommon alarm clock and Thaddeus Kandinsky’s useless guide. She almost put Scratch in her pocket, but in the end it seemed safer for him to stay behind.

Down in the hall, Ivy quickly remembered everything from the previous evening – the threadbare patterned carpet, the worn leather sofas, the set of sun-bleached watercolours. It looked like a crummy seaside hotel, badly in need of refurbishment.

Valian gestured around. ‘Welcome to the Cabbage Moon Inn,’ he announced sarcastically. ‘Best guestrooms in the land.’

They walked into a large dining room that echoed with the clink of glasses and laughter. Delicate paper snowflakes dangled from the ceiling and wreaths heavy with berries hung on the walls. Ivy could smell bacon and baked beans. Long wooden tables seated all manner of Hobsmatched guests, and behind a bar at the back, the doughy-faced man was busy polishing some cutlery.

‘That’s the innkeeper, Mr Littlefair,’ Valian whispered in her ear. ‘Old friend of Ethel’s.’

Ivy did a double take as she approached the bar. There were bottles and flasks of different coloured fluids, some steaming and bubbling, and above, where the pint glasses and wine glasses would have been stored in a normal pub, hung rows and rows of spectacles, sunglasses and reading glasses.

‘Why is th—?’

Her question was lost as Seb bumped into her, knocking her aside.

‘Mind out!’ he called, ducking his head and swatting at something. Ivy looked up and saw a meringue-topped pie crust bouncing through the air. ‘Don’t tell me you eat stuff that moves now,’ Seb groaned. ‘Doesn’t that give you indigestion?’

‘*That* is Lemon Meringue Sky,’ Valian corrected him. ‘A speciality in Lundinor. You should try some.’ He nodded at the nearest table, which had been taken by a large family wearing matching zookeeper uniforms. In the middle were bowls of cinnamon porridge and cereal, racks of toast and tiny jars of jam. ‘Breakfast comes with the room so you might as well eat.’ He pointed to a table at the back. ‘There’s space over there.’

Ivy flashed a look at Seb. She wondered if he had any appetite; she certainly didn’t. Still, they could try asking the diners about Granma Sylvie.

She glanced back at the family in zookeeper uniforms. The youngest, a toddler with an Elizabethan ruff around his neck (which also doubled as a bib), was throwing something lumpy and glittery at his siblings. Ivy couldn’t believe that this – that Lundinor – was part of normal life for some families.

As they headed across the room, a few dishes caught Ivy’s eye. There were pies with jumping crusts, muffins that sprouted fresh strawberries and even pots of honey that buzzed like a hive itself. ‘I didn’t expect food to be uncommon,’ she admitted.

‘It isn’t,’ Valian told her. ‘What they prepare it with is – ladles, terrines, ovens, hot plates – they make normal recipes turn out crazy.’ He whipped a paper napkin off a table and laid it out on his other hand. ‘Special Branch are always arresting uncommoners for cooking with uncommon objects outside undermarts. It’s illegal, but so tempting.’

Ivy frowned as she watched him take item after item off people’s tables, laying them delicately on his serviette, as if it was some kind of buffet.

She looked at the other customers. By the far door a group of men in football shirts, fishing waders and feathered hats were toasting each other with champagne glasses full of something green and sparkling. On the benches opposite them, a couple of traders in baseball caps and choirboy robes shared a dark bottle of something that appeared to be smoking. Ivy wondered what uncommoners’ lives were like when they weren’t in Lundinor. ‘Where do uncommoners live the rest of the year?’ she asked.

Valian pinched a slice of toast and deposited it on his napkin. ‘Same places muckers do. Your neighbour could be an uncommoner – you’d never know. Uncommoners learn to live secret lives, keeping their collections hidden. Special Branch monitor the use of uncommon objects outside undermarts. Lundinor’s only open three times a year; most uncommoners have regular jobs the rest of the time. The big traders spend months building up their collection or getting someone to do it for them.’ He pointed to his chest with his thumb, carefully balancing his mountain of food. ‘That’s my job. I’m a scout. People pay me to find stuff for them.’

Seb smiled. ‘Oh, of course. I should’ve guessed you were the lynchpin that holds everything together.’

Valian gritted his teeth. ‘You don’t understand anything. Uncommoners have a vital role in the world. It’s their responsibility to keep commoners safe from uncommon objects. Sometimes Special Branch have to interfere and then wipe everyone’s memories afterwards; sometimes it’s just a simple case of covering something up. It’s a fine balance.’

Seb sighed. ‘Come on, Ivy. Let’s sit down.’ He stretched his leg over the bench and took a seat. At the far end of the table sat an old lady with white hair. Valian muttered something before slinking over to the bar with his stolen breakfast.

The old lady shuffled up as Ivy took a seat next to Seb. Ivy liked the look of her immediately. She wore spectacles and a voluminous powder-blue dress that, along with her straw bonnet, made her look like Little Bo-Peep’s grandmother.

‘Morning, dears,’ she cooed. She reached for the handle of her teacup but missed.

Seb chuckled. Ivy elbowed him in the side. ‘Morning,’ she said, giving her brother a stern look.

‘I think I saw you two come in last night,’ the lady twittered. ‘You’re staying in the room next to me. I’m Violet.’

Ivy looked into her cornflower-blue eyes, which appeared cloudy behind her thick glasses. She doubted she could see anything at all.

‘Not many people arrive *after* the start of Trade these days,’ she continued. ‘Heard there’s going to be some sort of flash sale today at the Wanderer’s Warehouse on Makeshift Avenue. I expect you’re here for that.’

Ivy gave an awkward cough and looked at Seb. It wasn't as if they could tell anyone what they were *really* there for.

Just then, a girl wearing a pale pink ballet tutu and a tattered waistcoat approached the table. 'What'll it be then?' she asked, a feather poised in her hand.

Ivy looked at Seb.

'Um, can we just have a drink?' he asked.

'Of course,' the girl said. 'Hundred Punch OK?'

Ivy shrugged. 'Sure.'

The girl winked and laid two pairs of spectacles down in front of them before heading back to the bar.

Ivy stared at them, puzzled, while Seb rubbed a hand through his hair. 'This day is only going to get weirder, isn't it?' he muttered.

Violet smiled kindly. 'First time drinking from glasses, eh?' she guessed. 'Just open them up – they'll do the rest.'

Frowning, Seb carefully opened out his spectacles – half moon, with golden frames. Once the second arm had been fully extended, the glasses leaped up off the table and transformed into a drinking goblet – the lenses spiralled into a tall glass trumpet, while the frames formed a handle. Seb almost fell off the bench. 'Whoa!'

Ivy studied the sunglasses in front of her. She opened them carefully and watched, astonished, as they morphed into a smoked-glass goblet.

The girl in the tutu came over with a large porcelain jug, poured a fizzing transparent liquid into both glasses and left.

Ivy looked at it nervously. 'Bottoms up, I guess,' she said before taking a sip. The Hundred Punch was the strangest, most amazing thing she had ever tasted. At first it was cool and sweet and fizzy like apple-ade; then it became thick and foamy and tasted of buttery shortbread; then it went warm and gooey and filled Ivy's mouth with the sharp tang of rhubarb. 'It's like three flavours in one,' she exclaimed.

Seb nodded, his mouth twitching into a smile.

'Actually there's a hundred,' Violet explained. 'That's where it gets its name from. A hundred different tastes, a hundred different ways to make you feel better.'

Seb smacked his lips. 'Mine's super sweet, like liquid candyfloss.'

Grinning, Ivy took another mouthful and let the tastes roll around her tongue. 'I think my one might be apple pie – or maybe apple and rhubarb crumble . . .' She felt light and happy, as if she was about to fly away on one of the bubbles. Seb laughed at her, making her snort into her goblet.

Her exhilaration was short-lived. All at once she remembered why they were there: *Mum and Dad*. How could she enjoy herself while they were in mortal danger? Just thinking about her parents locked away somewhere made her want to cry. They might not even be together.

She looked over at Violet. Maybe this was a good time to start investigating. 'Er – what is it you sell?' she asked.

'Me?' The old lady's cheeks turned pink. 'You really want to know?'

Seb stared at Ivy and shook his head, but she ignored him.

'Yeah, really.'

Violet beamed. 'I'm a button trader,' she said. 'Violet Eyelet's Button Apothecary – you'll find me on the Gauntlet, just past Dragon Lane.

'Buttons do all kinds of things,' she continued. 'I love buttons – always have. I'd rather have a button than anything.' She reached into a pocket and brought out an avocado-green plastic button with ridges around the edge. 'They treat ailments, mostly. There's a button for everything these days. All you have to do is put it in your top pocket and the problem goes away. I've been using this one for a few days now to treat a little twinge in my left knee.'

Seb fought to keep his face expressionless. Ivy couldn't tell whether he was about to laugh or gasp with shock.

'Not many uncommoners use them any more,' Violet went on. 'I guess people think they're old fashioned, or . . . what is it they say? Alternative?' She fished around in another pocket and brought out a second button. This one was ivory-coloured, with three holes and an old trail of pink thread. 'This one works a treat for restoring health. The number of holes equates to the number of times you can use it, so this has three good uses. Here you go.'

Ivy stuttered, 'Oh – oh no, you don't have to . . .'

Violet Eyelet shook her head. 'No, no, don't be silly. You keep it. Payment for listening to me go on.'

Ivy smiled and took the button gratefully, stowing it away in her jeans pocket. She looked at the soft creases in Violet's face and wondered how old she was.

'I'm Ivy, by the way,' she said. 'This is my brother, Seb. We're not here for that sale thing you were talking about. We're here to find out more about our granma. She used to be a trader here, years ago.'

Violet managed to get a grip on her cup and took a sip of tea. 'Anything I can do to help?'

Seb leaned forward. 'Yeah, actually. Her name was Sylvie Wrench. Do you know anything about her?'

Violet's face lit up. 'Sylvie! Well, knot my cottons! She's back? Is she OK?'

Ivy winced. 'Yeah, sort of.'

'We were never meant to be friends, Sylv and I,' the old lady said. 'Octavius Wrench – Sylvie's father – he didn't like his workers mixing with his children. It wasn't seen as proper.'

Ivy straightened. 'Wait . . . You worked for our great-grandfather? Is that what the Wrenches sold? Buttons?'

Violet chuckled. 'Octavius Wrench interested in buttons? No, no. I was only able to sell buttons *later*. When I first took the glove, I became a scout; it was the easiest way to build a career in those days. Most people scouted for one of the big companies; I chose the Wrenches because they paid well and let you keep anything they didn't want. Octavius never wanted buttons – he thought they were useless.'

Seb asked, 'Do you remember when you last saw our granma?' Ivy could see him trying to connect the dots.

'Of *course* I do. I had to give enough underguard statements on the subject. It was back in sixty-nine; Twelfth Night . . . a few hours before the Great Battle. I'd just dropped off my last haul of scouted objects at the Wrench Mansion. Sylvie and I crossed paths as I was leaving.' She shivered, sending her glasses slipping to the end of her nose. 'Creepy place, their house; always used to turn my stitches wonky, if you know what I mean. I'm quite glad it's disappeared really.'

Ivy thought she'd misheard. 'Sorry – *disappeared*?'

'Oh yes. The Wrenches were incredibly secretive. They didn't trust anyone; that's why they built their mansion with uncommon bricks so no one outside the family would ever find it. Uncommon bricks like to move, you see, so the house never stayed in the same place.' Violet took another sip of tea. 'Only members of the Wrench family knew how to find the secret entrance. I had to be escorted blindfold every time I went to drop off my scout haul. Sylvie did it occasionally – that's how we became friends.'

‘Do you know *why* our granma disappeared that night?’ Ivy asked hurriedly.

Violet shook her head, glancing around warily. ‘It’s not for me to speculate,’ she whispered. ‘I’m just glad she’s OK.’

Ivy turned to Seb, her eyes wide. ‘What about the mansion? There might be answers there.’

‘No one has seen it since Twelfth Night 1969,’ Violet told her. ‘The underguard looked for years but even they had to give up.’

Ivy had a pretty good idea who’d been involved in that search. *Smokehart.*

‘The house was designed so that any member of the family could find it easily,’ Violet said. ‘Theoretically it should still work for you two. Why don’t you ask Sylvie?’

‘She’s forgotten everything,’ Seb explained. He propped his chin on his hand.

Not everything, Ivy remembered. Granma Sylvie did have memories returning – they were just very vague. She tried to remember what her granma had said. *A woman with sad blue eyes, the sound of water* . . .

‘Is there a map of Lundinor we could look at?’ she asked. ‘I think I’ve got an idea.’

Violet brightened. ‘There’s a street map on the side of the featherlight mailhouse in the centre of town, though I don’t know how up to date it is.’

Ivy got to her feet and turned to Seb. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘There’s no time to lose.’

‘Wait. Before you go . . .’ Violet lowered her voice. ‘Sylvie was a good friend of mine, but not many people around here will tell you the same. Especially now. Something’s got the underguard riled and there have been whispers about the Fallen—’ She broke off and shook her head. ‘Well, let’s just call them whispers about terrible things; things that would make the toughest of traders wish to stay silent.’

Chapter Eighteen

‘The street bell said to take a left here,’ Ivy reminded the others as she turned the corner. Seb was striding beside her, with Valian plodding along behind them like an unwanted smell.

They came to a paved square dotted with café tables and traders leisurely sipping fizzing drinks – Hundred Punch, Ivy guessed. In the middle was a spindly redbrick tower that stood over thirty metres tall. There were holes in the walls that looked like small dark windows.

‘That must be it,’ Ivy figured; ‘the featherlight mailhouse.’

Seb craned his neck. ‘It looks like it’s gonna fall over any second.’

Ivy saw that the slate roof tiles were shaking and sliding over each other. Hundreds of different-coloured feathers flew out of a large hole where the chimney would be.

Valian shouldered his way past them. ‘Well, it’s old enough. And so is the poor guy who runs it. Albert Merribus, he’s called. He must have been mail-master for nearly half a century. The map’s on the other side.’

As they got closer, Ivy heard the bricks crunching and cracking, as if they too were moving. She watched an uncommoner approach one of the dark windows and stuff his hand inside. He retrieved a feather, which he then used to scribble something in the air. When he’d finished, the feather disappeared back through the hole.

Ivy replayed Granma Sylvie’s memory sequence in her head. She’d have to search the map thoroughly, but this might just work. Right now her parents could be—But she couldn’t let herself think about it. Just then, she heard high-pitched voices.

‘Go on, throw it at him. I bet you can’t make that third hole on the right.’

‘Yeah? Watch this!’

As they rounded the tower, Ivy saw a group of children holding something in their hands – though she couldn’t quite see what.

‘Here goes!’ One of the boys took aim and lobbed whatever it was at the tower. Ivy thought she saw a flash of shiny plastic before the object hit the wall with a squelch, turning into yellowy-green goo on impact.

‘Ha! Told you. Hear that, Merribus!’ the boy called, cupping his hands around his mouth. ‘You’re safe *this* time!’

Anger bubbled up inside Ivy. She herself hadn’t come up against bullies before, probably because nobody was going to pick on Seb’s little sister (his arms were bigger then anyone else’s at their school). But whoever the old man inside the tower was, he didn’t deserve this.

‘That’s horrible!’ she shouted, unable to bite her tongue. ‘Stop it!’

One of the boys started to taunt her, but when he saw Seb and Valian come up on either side, he re considered and made a run for it. The others scarpered after him.

Ivy shook her head and turned back to the tower. The map was easy to spot, although it wasn’t what she had expected.

‘So . . . it’s made of rubbish,’ Seb said in a flat voice. ‘How eco-friendly.’

Ivy looked closely. The map was constructed from odd twigs and branches, tea bags, paper and glass – all nailed or tied with twine to the wall. Street names had been painted on in black paint, and there were deep white scratches in the bricks behind the map, as if the objects had been dragged over them again and again.

‘The map changes,’ Valian explained, seeing her expression. ‘Things move in Lundinor, so they move on this.’

Ivy stepped back to try and get her bearings. ‘The Gauntlet’s here’ – she pointed, spotting a long straight road running through the centre of the main cavern – ‘so Ethel’s must be about there . . .’ She stretched up on tiptoe to indicate a spot a couple of metres above her head. But she was looking for something else.

‘Seb, see if you can see any water on the map – a lake or a pond or anything like that.’

He scanned the wall. ‘You wanna tell me why?’

‘It’s what Granma Sylvie remembered,’ Ivy replied. ‘She had a memory of a gloomy old house full of faces – that must be the mansion. But before that, she said she heard the sound of water. So maybe the two are connected?’

Seb shuffled from side to side, peering at the top of the map. ‘I can’t see anything that looks like a lake. There’s some sort of pond up there, and maybe that old kettle with the streamer hanging down is a fountain, but I can’t be certain. This place is huge. We’ve got more chance of finding a needle in a haystack than the Wrench Mansion.’

‘Wrench Mansion?’ said a deep voice. ‘Ha!’

Ivy froze. It had come from a small window only a metre away from her head. She approached it cautiously.

‘Er, hello?’ She laid her hands on the unsteady bricks and peered into the hole. ‘Do you know something about the Wrench Mansion?’

The hole wasn’t big enough for her head to fit through, so she had a restricted view. She caught glimpses of a messy office, the air filled with floating feather down and scraps of paper. There were ink splodges on the floor and mugs of old tea on the wooden desk. The place smelled of tea bags and mouldy cheese. ‘Anybody there?’

A gruff voice answered, ‘I’ll tell you something about the Wrench Mansion . . .’ Suddenly a face appeared through the window. Ivy sprang back as she saw a wild mane of white-blond hair, a grizzled chin, pockmarked cheeks and fierce blue eyes.

‘No point bloody looking for it,’ Albert Merribus growled. ‘It’s only gonna be found when it wants to be. I’ve had enough of you young fame-hunters trying to locate it. All anyone’s ever discovered is that it must be north of here, because that’s the direction the feathers fly in.’

Ivy searched for a response. ‘I, er—’

Suddenly a voice like an ice storm swept in from somewhere over Ivy’s shoulder.

‘*IS THERE ANYTHING THE MATTER HERE, MERRIBUS?*’

Ivy turned to find herself face-to-waist with Officer Smokehart. She looked helplessly for Seb, who was retreating round the tower, his eyes wide. Valian was nowhere to be seen.

‘Have these two been hassling you?’ Smokehart asked Merribus. He lowered his head towards Ivy’s. She could see the reflection of her pink freckled face in his dark glasses.

Merribus grumbled.

‘Trust me, Albert,’ Smokehart went on, ‘this is Ivy *Wrench*. She doesn’t deserve any chances, so don’t hold back.’

Ivy clenched her fists and stared him down. He was just like one of those bullies. ‘It’s Ivy *Sparrow*,’ she said through gritted teeth.

‘Thanks for the concern, Officer, but there’s nothing to report this time,’ Merribus said finally. He scratched his chin as he peered at Ivy. She noticed that he was wearing navy felt gloves. ‘They were looking for an address that’s impossible to find, is all. Waste of their time and mine. Now, good day!’ And with that, Merribus and his explosion of white hair disappeared inside the tower.

Smokehart’s thin lips curled into a snarl as he rounded on Ivy and Seb. ‘I’m watching you,’ he said. ‘Both of you.’ And his voice cut like a knife.

Chapter Nineteen

Ivy scuffed the toes of her wellies over the cobbles. Seb was standing beside her, his hands stuffed into the front pocket of his hoodie. The pond he had spotted on the map had turned out to be a public toilet – which wasn't the greatest surprise, as all the street bells they'd asked for directions had repeatedly told them that there was no pond in Lundinor.

'What do we do if the fountain's not here?' Seb asked as they trudged down another street. 'Mum and Dad . . .' He couldn't finish.

Ivy was trying to keep calm. *Two days*. That was it. She could almost hear the uncommon alarm clock ticking past with every pace she took.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned. *Valian.* She scowled at him. She'd like to know what he'd been up to back there – vanishing as soon as Smokehart appeared. She wished Ethel had never shaken his hand. That way, at least she and Seb could hold a conversation in private.

'That last street bell said it was just up here on the left,' she reminded Seb. She hoped it really was. At least the street bells had actually heard of a fountain – though Ivy knew that the sound of water could have come from anything.

They had reached a busy street lined with shops selling everything from uncommon feather dusters to snow-globe cameras and everlasting baubles. Ivy couldn't hear water anywhere.

'It must be around here somewhere,' Seb said determinedly. 'Let's split up.' He tugged Ivy to one side. Valian followed. 'That means you go in the opposite direction,' he told him.

Valian shrugged and headed away from them.

Ivy looked around. She didn't really know what she was looking for. The only fountains she'd ever seen had been huge things like the ones in Trafalgar Square.

'What if it's just a small one; something you'd have in your back garden?'

‘Or,’ Seb said, stopping abruptly, ‘in your wall.’ He pointed and hurried on. ‘Come on!’

Ivy dashed after him. He’d turned down a narrow path between two shops.

‘What do you think that is?’ Seb asked, gesturing towards one of the shadowy walls.

Ivy squinted. Hidden behind a tangle of weeds in the brickwork was a tall, arched metal panel. Ivy assumed from its distinctive pale green colour that it was made of copper, like the Statue of Liberty. At the bottom was a semicircular basin, with a chipped spout above it.

‘A fountain,’ she observed, brushing back the trailing plants. ‘But it’s empty. It can’t have been used in years.’

Ivy wondered if she could use her whispering to test a theory. She laid her hand against the fountain. Unlike the surrounding air, the metal was the temperature of warm breath. If she blanked out every noise around her and focused on it, she could even hear soft whispers.

‘It’s uncommon,’ she told him. ‘I’m certain of it.’

Seb was looking at her strangely. ‘Right . . .’

Ivy ignored his expression and scooped some of the mud and leaves out of the basin. At the bottom was a strange sundial, with initials for the four directions of the compass.

‘What clues do we have?’ she asked. ‘Let’s go through them again.’

He sighed. ‘Granma Sylvie remembered hearing water, and then she saw the house . . .’

Ivy touched the large *N*. ‘The feathers fly north,’ she said, as if in a trance. ‘That’s what Merribus said.’

‘But this fountain’s dry,’ Seb pointed out, ‘and hasn’t been used in ages.’

It hasn’t been used, Ivy thought. *Of course.* ‘We need water! Seb, see if you can get some from the street. It doesn’t have to be much.’

Minutes later, Seb returned with a grubby black bucket. Valian was beside him.

‘I hear there’s no need for us to continue searching,’ Valian announced with sarcastic cheer. ‘You’ve found a fountain?’

Ivy sighed and snatched the bucket, then looked up and down the alleyway. It was empty and the fountain couldn’t easily be seen from the street. Satisfied that they were unlikely to attract attention, she held the bucket over the basin.

Unable to cross her fingers, she made a wish and poured the liquid in slowly.

They waited in silence for a minute, but nothing happened.

‘Well, that was an anti-climax,’ Seb said, rolling up the sleeves of his hoodie. ‘Do you think we need to do something else, maybe?’ He dipped his fingers in the water and swished it around. The sound bounced off the opposite wall.

‘I think you just did something,’ Ivy said. ‘We needed the *sound* of water, remember?’

She felt the air around her shiver as if a truck were passing by. Something in the ground rumbled, deep and low. She shot a look to either side. ‘Can you two hear that?’

Seb nodded.

Ivy glanced at her feet. The earth between the cobbles was trembling.

‘It’s coming from the fountain,’ Valian told them, his eyes fixed on the pale-green archway.

All at once the brick wall on either side of the fountain shook violently, sending cement dust up into the air. The metal basin screeched as it drew away from the wall. Ivy reached out for Seb’s arm, steadying herself. ‘What’s happening?’

He pointed to the arched surround. ‘Ivy, look!’

The metal was glowing as if being heated in a furnace. Gradually it formed the long iron bars of a gate. With a sharp screech, two cast-iron posts emerged from the bricks on either side. The gate between them was shrouded in cobwebs, and at the very top was a single word in wrought iron: WRENCH.

Ivy stumbled backwards. Valian’s eyes were gleaming. ‘No way,’ he breathed. ‘No way. You’ve actually found the Wrench Mansion. It must be because you’re related; I don’t know why else it would open for you.’

Seb rubbed dust out of his eyes. ‘This can’t be the Wrench Mansion; it isn’t a house. It’s just a gate.’

He was right. No matter how hard Ivy looked, there was nothing behind the gate except what had been there before. A brick wall.

Valian smiled mischievously. ‘Why don’t you open it and see?’ He stepped back and gestured for Seb to do the honours.

Seb rolled his eyes. ‘Fine.’ He laid both hands on the ornate iron bars and pushed.

Ivy was right behind him. As the gates parted, she saw a line of pitch-black, which expanded as the gates swung open, revealing a muddy pathway on the other side.

‘Valian’s right,’ she exclaimed, laying a hand on Seb’s arm. She peered into the gloom. The path was littered with leaves and bordered on both sides by an overgrown lawn. In the distance she could see a dark structure looming against an evening sky. A chill swept over her as she watched. It was like looking through an arched window into another world.

Valian touched the gate carefully with his gloved hands. ‘I can’t believe it. This place hasn’t been opened since Twelfth Night 1969.’ He stepped through the gates.

Seb thrust a hand in front of him. ‘Hang on – we don’t even know what’s in there. I mean, look at the place; it’s like Dracula’s holiday home.’

‘That doesn’t matter. There are gonna be more clues in there than you’ll find out here. You’ve got less than two days to save your parents, remember?’

Ivy peered through the gate, focusing on her mum and dad, wherever they were. She suspected that she and Seb would have to take risks if they wanted to get them back. *We’re coming to get you, Mum,* she said to herself. *Just hold on, Dad. We’re coming.*

Chapter Twenty

Once they were on the path the air became cooler. Ivy pulled her coat tight around her and looked up at the full moon. They couldn't be underground in Lundinor any more. She wondered if the mansion was in London – or, indeed, in another part of the world. She smelled fresh pine and guessed that the dark shadow in the distance was a forest.

Set up on the hill, the mansion stood four storeys high. Hunched stone figures perched on the corners of the mansard roof and the leaded glass windows glittered in the moonlight. Ivy looked back at the gate as they walked away. It formed part of an iron fence that ran round the lawn. She couldn't see anything beyond it.

Valian strode up the hill as if he had a train to catch. His eagerness made Ivy uneasy. She looked at Seb and wondered if he too was worrying about Valian's real motives – and about what they were going to find inside Granma Sylvie's childhood home.

The front door was, unsurprisingly, black. Seb examined the small stained-glass window set into the top. 'It's of a crow decapitating a snake,' he said. '*Homely*.'

Valian tried the door handle first, but it wasn't till Seb touched it that it decided to move. A long hiss escaped as it opened up.

Inside, they found a thickly carpeted entrance hall overlooked by two galleries, with a grand staircase and an ornate moulded ceiling. Uncommon lemon squeezers glowed into brightness as the three of them made their way in and gazed around. The walls were covered with dark oil paintings. Some depicted the house itself, while others were portraits of finely dressed ladies and gentlemen. Ivy felt their yellow eyes boring into her as she turned. *A house of faces*, she thought. *That's what Granma Sylvie described in her recurring memory.*

The air smelled musty; the whole place was still and empty. Ivy ventured towards one of the portraits. Forty years of dust had settled over the faces of the subjects, so she pulled down her sleeve and stretched up to rub it off.

‘Careful,’ Seb warned, coming to join her. ‘This place doesn’t exactly say *make yourself at home*.’

‘No,’ Ivy admitted. *But it was Granma’s home once.* She swept her sleeve over the painting till six pairs of eyes peeped through the dust at her. She knew one pair very well. ‘There she is,’ she said, clearing the dust off Granma Sylvie’s face. She must have been about Ivy’s age when the portrait was done. Her golden hair was shoulder length, her eyes amber, and there were deep dimples in her cheeks.

Seb rubbed more dust off the bottom of the frame and saw a label. ‘*The Family Wrench, 1960*,’ he read. ‘That’s nine years before they all disappeared.’

Ivy looked at the frame. It had six names written on it. She tried to match everyone up. Granma Sylvie’s three brothers were beside her: Cartimore, a blond, plump-cheeked pig of a boy; Silas, raven-haired and sickly, and Norton – scruffy-looking, with two teeth missing. Ivy shivered as she studied their dull eyes and pinched expressions.

Granma Sylvie’s mother, Helena, was the smallest figure in the picture. She had tightly curled mousy hair and wide, almond-shaped eyes, like Granma Sylvie, except that Helena’s were blue. There was something haunted and lonely about them that made Ivy feel sad.

Sad blue eyes . . . Recalling Granma Sylvie’s memories again, Ivy realized she must have been seeing the face of her mother.

In the centre of the portrait stood Octavius, Granma Sylvie’s father. He had a strong, imperious face with a wide jaw and jutting cheekbones. Above his thin mouth rested a waxed black moustache.

‘So that’s the relatives,’ Seb joked, his eyes wide. ‘Can’t exactly see Mum and Dad inviting them over for Christmas.’

Ivy agreed. Still, she tried to take note of all of their faces so that she could describe them to Granma Sylvie. She wondered how she was doing in hospital and hoped she hadn’t had any more visits from the Dirge.

‘Hey, look,’ Seb said. Beneath the portrait was a chest of drawers, on top of which rested a rotary-dial telephone, a glass ashtray and a stack of newspapers – all covered in at least two centimetres of furry dust. Seb shook one of them clean and read the date: *4 January 1969.*

4 January . . . Ivy wondered if there was anything significant about it. 'That's from the day before Twelfth Night,' she realized.

The paper was called the *Barrow Post*. Ivy leaned over to read it. She deduced it must be an uncommon publication because it was priced at 0.2 grade.

'*Candidates Promise Fallen Guild Crackdown*,' she read, her voice echoing through the hall. '*In the final push before tomorrow's elections, the two leading candidates in the race for Quartermaster of the Great Cavern – Octavius Wrench and Mr Punch – have been speaking in the Market Cross. Wrench today promised to drive out corruption within the underguard by bringing in his own team of investigators to help deal with the Fallen Guild.*'

Seb looked up at the portrait. 'Octavius was running for Quartermaster,' he said. 'I guess he must have lost. Didn't you say that Mr Punch is the Quartermaster now?'

Before Ivy could answer, she spied Valian scuttling up the main stairs towards the gallery. 'Aren't you meant to be our bodyguard?' she called.

Valian turned round, his face flushed. 'I thought we should probably split up to search the place for clues. It'll be quicker.'

Ivy exchanged a suspicious look with Seb.

'Let him go,' Seb said quietly. 'It'll smell better without him around.'

Once Valian had disappeared upstairs, Seb folded up the edition of the *Barrow Post* and stuffed it into his hoodie pocket. Ivy searched through the chest of drawers. There were a number of other items – a pair of polished brogues, a horsehair hairbrush, some unopened letters addressed to Master Norton – but nothing of any real interest, until . . .

Ivy gazed at the bottom drawer. Unlike the others, it had a keyhole. She gave it a yank but it didn't budge. *If only I still had that uncommon string.* 'It's locked. Do you think you can break it open?'

Seb rolled up his sleeves and got down on his knees. 'Maybe.' He looked underneath the chest and gave it a thump, then pulled hard on the drawer handle. Eventually the drawer snapped open and a cream paper envelope fluttered out. Ivy snatched it up off the floor. Her fingers sizzled with heat immediately. On the front, in scratchy black ink, was written:

Send to:
The Private Study of Octavius Wrench,

The Wrench Mansion

There was a slightly smudged ink stamp on the top right corner that said DIRECT MAIL.

‘It’s uncommon,’ Ivy said.

Seb went still. ‘How do you know that? You did it before with the fountain. Am I missing something?’

Ivy pushed a tangle of curls behind her ear. She had to tell Seb; he was her brother. She looked at him seriously. ‘Promise you won’t make me feel like a freak if I tell you?’

Seb frowned. ‘Uh, *OK* . . .’

‘The thing is,’ Ivy said quietly, ‘well – when I touch something uncommon, I can kind of sense it. First my skin goes really warm and tingly where I’ve touched it and then’ – she hesitated – ‘I hear these whispers coming from it.’

‘What? How does that—?’ Before Seb could formulate a question, Ivy recounted everything Scratch had explained to her that morning.

‘*Whispering*,’ Seb repeated when she’d finished. ‘Right.’ He gave her a thin smile. ‘And there’s me thinking this couldn’t get any weirder. I mean, I’m no expert, but hearing voices in your head—’

Ivy stamped her foot. ‘Seb! They’re not in my head! And anyway, you promised not to make me feel like a freak.’

He held up his hands. ‘OK, OK.’ He pointed to the envelope. ‘Well, look, if it’s definitely uncommon, then what do you think it does?’

‘I don’t know.’ She turned it over. It wasn’t sealed. ‘Maybe we should read what’s inside? It might be a clue to what happened on Twelfth Night.’ She slid her fingers under the flap on the back and opened it.

And suddenly the room was spinning.

‘Seb!’

‘Ivy?!’

The hallway – with its grand staircase and dark oil paintings – was swept away. Ivy felt herself rotating. She didn’t want to reach out with her arms in case she hit something.

After a few seconds the spinning slowed down and a new room came into focus. Ivy fell to her knees and closed her eyes to let the dizziness subside. Her stomach was doing somersaults.

‘Ivy?’ Seb’s hand was on her shoulder. ‘You need to see this.’

Slowly she opened her eyes and struggled to her feet.

They were in a lavishly furnished room lined with mahogany bookcases and glass cabinets. Pale silvery light fell from a set of uncommon milk jugs hovering in the centre of the ceiling.

Seb took a few steps forward. ‘Where are we?’ He ran his fingers along the top of a studded green leather chair tucked under a desk. They came away covered in grey fur.

Everything in the room was covered in such a thick layer of dust and cobwebs that Ivy could barely make out individual objects – a crystal decanter and matching glasses; an ivory tusk displayed in a glass cabinet. No one had been there for a very long time.

She scanned the walls and spotted a single portrait hanging between two bookcases. ‘Octavius Wrench,’ she said, recognizing him from the portrait in the entrance hall. She re-read the front of the envelope. ‘*The Private Study of Octavius Wrench.* Do you think this is it?’

‘Must be. The books are all about the history of Lundinor or uncommon stuff.’ Seb looked around the room. ‘It’s weird that there isn’t a door anywhere. That envelope must be the only way in or out. Maybe if you open it up, it takes us out again . . .’

Ivy considered the envelope carefully. Seb could be right. Common envelopes open, so uncommon envelopes might just open different kinds of things. ‘Let’s look around for more clues before we go,’ she suggested. ‘We might be close to something.’

Seb nodded and headed towards the bookcases on the other side of the room.

Ivy took a few shaky steps forward. She leaned against a wooden chair back, trying to steady herself. She could be imagining it, but the walls still looked like they were spinning . . . or maybe it was just the wallpaper.

The wall beside her was covered in thick, emerald-green paper decorated with vine leaves. Ivy traced one of them with her fingers. There was a loud *pop!* and the vine she had been touching sprang out of the paper and reached for her.

She jumped back. ‘Seb! Over here!’

As he scurried over, a sound like the popping of a hundred champagne corks filled the room, and every vine started crawling out of the wall, unravelling and twisting itself into a rope.

Seb raised an eyebrow. ‘Cool. Even better than the origami wallpaper in our room.’

The ropes had soon formed a large rectangular door with an oval doorknob. Eventually they creaked to a stop and, with a click, the door fell ajar.

‘Not *another* doorway,’ Ivy groaned. She felt like they’d had their fair share already. They’d better take a careful look before they stepped through.

Seb laid a hand on a leafy green frond. ‘Seems OK. Let’s see where it leads.’

‘Wait—!’ Ivy started, but it was too late. The vines scratched and crackled as the door opened and Seb stepped through.

A cloud of rust-red dust rose into the air and Ivy put a hand over her mouth. ‘Seb!’ she spluttered.

‘I’m OK,’ he coughed. ‘You can come in.’

Ivy heaved a chair over from the study and used it to wedge the door open before tentatively crossing the threshold. ‘Where are we?’

They had emerged into a small circular room. It appeared to be empty. ‘I don’t know,’ Seb said. ‘But there’s loads more doors here.’

Ivy squinted, wiping the dust out of her eyes. Through the haze she could just see that the room wasn’t in fact circular. It had straight walls, with a door in each. She turned slowly on the spot, counting. Altogether, there were . . .

‘Six,’ she said. Her voice ricocheted around the chamber, making her jump. Two of the doors were made of stone, one was stainless steel, while another was crafted from old splintered wood. The fifth had been carved from some kind of glittering rock that Ivy had never seen before. Each door had the same design drawn upon it. A dinner-plate-sized image of a coin – *the crooked sixpence.*

‘The Dirge,’ Ivy realized, with a shiver.

Seb’s shoulders tensed. ‘What did you say?’

Suddenly Ivy was spotting clues everywhere, like spiders waiting in the shadows – six doors, for the six members of the Fallen Guild, each door with a word engraved above it.

‘The code names,’ she said aloud. A sense of dread swelled inside her as she read them. ‘*Monkshood*, *Ragwort*, *Wolfsbane*, *Nightshade*, *Hemlock* . . .’ She froze. ‘Seb – Ethel told me about this place. It was called the

Hexroom. It's where the Dirge used to meet.' The very thought made Ivy's skin crawl. She wondered what number of evil, whispered conversations had taken place here years ago.

She stopped when she was facing the open door they'd come in through – the one made of vine leaves. She slowly pushed it to, just enough to see behind it. The reverse of the door was crafted from stone and bore the image of a crooked sixpence, just like the others. The head on the sixpence was the same one she'd seen on the coin from Granma Sylvie's house – a hooded face with a large square jaw. A mask covered the person's eyes and nose, ending in pointed tusks at each side of the mouth. Chiselled into the bricks above was another code-name: *Blackclaw*.

Seb gasped. 'Wait – does that mean what I think it means?'

Ivy nodded slowly, still in a daze. She glanced towards the study. 'There's only one reason why Octavius Wrench would have a secret door that led to the Hexroom.'

Seb turned towards her, his eyes wide. 'He was a member of the Dirge . . . Granma's dad was a member of the Dirge.' He started pacing. 'I don't get it. Do you think she knew? Do you think anyone knows?'

Images swept through Ivy's mind: six hooded figures emerging from the shadows, each wearing a different mask . . . She grabbed her brother's arm. 'Seb, we need to get out of here.'

He went still. 'Yeah, yeah we do.' He headed towards the door of vines, pushing the chair away. Ivy took one last glance around as she followed. She looked down at her wellies, which had left footprints in the dust. It lay in an unbroken sheet across the Hexroom – except in two places. There was a bare triangle at the foot of two of the six doors, as if they'd recently been opened. One was the stainless steel one belonging to Wolfsbane; the other was the wooden door belonging to Ragwort. Ivy barely had time to register the information, let alone figure out what it meant, before Seb called out urgently to her.

'Come on! Quickly.'

At that very moment, the air was pierced with a long, high-pitched howl. The sound bounced off all six walls of the Hexroom and echoed around Octavius Wrench's study. Every hair on Ivy's body stood on end. 'What was that?' she whispered. It sounded like an animal, an angry one. As the howl filled her ears again, she tried to pinpoint where it was coming from.

Seb tugged her sleeve. ‘There.’ He pointed over at the Wolfsbane door. There was a line of sickly green light around the edges and Ivy could hear scratching behind it. Her mouth went dry as the smell of damp dog crept into her nostrils. She thought she recognized it.

‘Whatever’s behind that door,’ she said, ‘I think it might have been there yesterday morning, during the break-in at Granma Sylvie’s.’

Seb grabbed her arm and they ran.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ivy scrambled back into the study, tripping over the thick carpet. She grabbed Seb's sweatshirt with one hand and tore open the uncommon envelope with the other. The room spun. Mahogany bookcases and silvery milk jugs disappeared – until the murky hallway of the Wrench Mansion zoomed around them.

Ivy bent forward, heaving air into her lungs. That had been *way* too close. Whatever was down there, it had almost caught them. She looked up into the gloom of the hallway, surprisingly relieved to be back there. She and Seb had reappeared at the foot of the stairs. Valian was nowhere to be seen. Ivy wondered what he'd been getting up to.

For a moment she stood there while she tried to think. She and Seb were still panting for breath. It was the only noise breaking the silence until—

'I'd bet my claws you thought I couldn't follow you here, didn't you?' asked a voice.

Ivy spun round.

Standing on the other side of the hall was a *giant wolf*. Its pelt was shiny black with flecks of silver, and there was a diamond-encrusted pet collar hanging loosely around its neck. Ivy stiffened. The beast's eyes were blood-red with a small white pupil, like that of some demon robot.

'Now, isn't this interesting,' the wolf purred. It curled thick, leathery lips around each word. 'I wonder what you're both doing back in your ancestral home . . .'

A prickle ran between Ivy's shoulder blades. *It can talk. The wolf can talk.*

'Have you hidden it *here*? I wonder.' The wolf's voice was expressive but hoarse, like a Shakespearean actor with a sore throat.

Ivy forced her shaking hands into fists. 'L-leave us alone,' she stammered.

Seb lunged in front of her. 'Shoo! Get out of here! Go on – go!'

The wolf raised a tufty eyebrow. '*Shoo?*' It threw back its head and opened its considerable jaws, laughing. Ivy couldn't help but notice the rows of razor-sharp teeth.

'Ivy—' Seb stumbled on the carpet.

She looked frantically around the hall. There was no way out. The wolf was standing between them and the front door. Their only option was to run up the stairs and hope it wasn't fast enough to catch them.

It swished its long tail. 'I'll ask you once more, little children.' It lowered its head and its voice deepened. 'Where have you hidden it?'

Ivy cried out. She couldn't help it. The creature was monstrous; whatever she'd been expecting to find here, it wasn't this.

The wolf's ears pricked up like great hairy antennae. 'Oh dear, are you crying because the big bad wolf asked you a question? How does the story go . . . ?' it asked, chuckling. 'The big bad wolf will blow your house down if—?' It shook its head. 'No, no, that's not the one. How about: the big bad wolf will eat your grandma if—? Nope, that's not it. Ah, yes, I know. What about: the big bad wolf will skin you alive if you don't tell him where you've hidden his mistress's property?' It bared more teeth. 'Now, that's much more accurate.'

Ivy gulped in terror. She wanted to move – she knew she should move – but she just couldn't. If she turned and ran, the wolf would catch her – it was twice her size, with rippling muscles and long claws; of *course* it would. She remembered measuring the paw-prints in Granma Sylvie's kitchen against her hand and decided that she was definitely facing their owner.

Something clattered on the gallery. The wolf looked up as a dark figure shot across the landing.

Valian.

Ivy recognized his nimble figure, but his face was unusually puffy and red and the sleeves of his leather jacket had been pushed up to the elbow. He launched himself off the stairs and landed in a crouch. In his hand he was swinging what appeared to be a large brown elastic band.

'*Ivy, Seb!*' he yelled. '*The door!*'

Ivy hesitated. How could they get to it? There was no way—

Valian released the elastic band. It shot towards the wolf like a dart, snapping into different shapes as it did so. First it made a circle, and a pair of brass cymbals appeared in the centre; then it formed a long curved shape, and a trombone appeared. Instruments continued popping out of it – drums, trumpets, violins. They crashed into the wolf in a screeching, squawking, tooting riot, and then started playing *on* its body. The cymbals clashed around its head; the drumsticks beat its back. The wolf thrashed to and fro, and Ivy wondered whether she and Seb might manage to run past before it got free.

Seb was obviously thinking the same thing. 'Ivy – go!'

He pushed her, and suddenly she was running as hard as she could. Valian and Seb reached the front door first and opened it so she could go straight through.

They sprinted down the hill towards the gate without looking back. Ivy's wellies slapped down on the path, resonating out into the night.

Valian threw open the iron gates, and they hurtled through – only to meet a brick wall on the other side. Rebounding off it, Seb turned and shut the gates with an almighty clang. For an instant Ivy thought she glimpsed a wet black nose fading through the gates like a ghost, but perhaps it was just a shadow.

The gate-posts vibrated before sinking back into the bricks, and within seconds the pale-green fountain had re-formed.

Ivy eyed Valian as the three of them leaned over, panting. She remembered that he'd been out of breath even before the wolf showed up.

She straightened and looked around. The fountain was back in place, the basin full of dry leaves, as if there had never been any water in it. The alleyway appeared to be in a different part of Lundinor. There was no one around.

She tried to gather her thoughts.

Granma Sylvie's father, Octavius, was Blackclaw, a member of the Dirge . . .

She didn't know what implications that had for getting her parents back.

A giant talking wolf was there during the break-in at Granma Sylvie's . . .

Which meant that it probably worked for the Dirge. Ivy wondered if it had been following them.

Valian was up to something at the mansion . . .

She couldn't figure him out. One minute he was saving them, the next he was abandoning them. And he kept disappearing. It was like that was the only thing he knew how to do.

In her mind’s eye she saw the thin black hands of the uncommon alarm clock ticking away. All she knew for certain was that she didn’t have much time to work it all out.

Chapter Twenty-two

The Cabbage Moon Inn was quieter than it had been at breakfast. The dining room smelled of lemon washingup liquid and tea. A few members of staff were mopping the floor, or wiping down tables.

Still weary, Ivy slumped into a chair in the far corner. As Seb and Valian took a seat opposite, the innkeeper, Mr Littlefair, came over.

‘What can I get the three of you, then?’ he asked in a jolly voice. ‘You look like you’re thirsty.’

Ivy considered ordering Hundred Punch, but instead opted for water. Seb ordered a Coke and Valian chose something called a Bugtop.

After the man had moved on to the next table, Ivy folded her arms and leaned forward. ‘Can we have some privacy, please?’ she asked Valian.

‘Yeah,’ Seb agreed. ‘Go be someone else’s bad smell.’

To Ivy’s surprise, Valian seemed more than happy to leave them. Once he was out of earshot, she leaned closer to Seb. ‘I don’t trust him. He was up to something in the mansion – I just know it.’

Seb’s eyes followed Valian across the room. ‘Why did Ethel choose *him* to look out for us? We don’t know anything about him. Where’s his home and family? He doesn’t seem to have any friends; that says a lot.’

Ivy nodded in agreement – though she doubted they could give Valian the slip in Lundinor. She turned her thoughts back to the mansion. ‘What we learned about Octavius Wrench . . .’ she whispered, not daring to voice the terrible truth. ‘Apart from being horrifically awful, does that help us with Mum and Dad at all?’

Seb frowned. ‘Maybe Granma stole something from him . . . And now he wants it back.’

Ivy shook her head. ‘He can’t want it back. There’s no way he’d still be alive today – Twelfth Night 1969 was over forty years ago.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Do you still have that newspaper?’

Seb stuffed a hand into his pocket. ‘Yeah . . .’ He sounded surprised to find that the paper had actually made it back with him.

Ivy spread it out on the table. Seb shuffled round so that they could read it together:

> Whoever wins the election for quartermaster, the task ahead is a formidable one. In the last six months 97% of assaults on uncommoners in undermarts were made by members of the dead community. Notably, selkies account for over half of these, closely followed by creeps and ghouls. In every case, the crooked sixpence of the Fallen Guild was found at the scene. Many people are questioning the nature of the partnership between the dead and the Fallen Guild, speculating that the Fallen Guild have been offering more than grade for the services of members of the dead community. Whatever is truly behind their allegiance, it can only be fuelling rumours of a dead uprising. So far only three members of the dead community have been prosecuted. Underguards claim that not enough witnesses are coming forward to give evidence.
>
> Octavius Wrench’s manifesto outlines stricter penalties to deal with the races of the dead. He said today: ‘Evil-doers will be rooted out by any means necessary. Members of the dead who continue to disobey our laws will be expunged.’
>
> The current Quartermaster standing for re-election, Mr Punch, responded, saying: ‘Yes, there is evil at work within Lundinor, but the way to overcome this is not by perpetuating fear, but by strengthening our communities and working together to make the undermart a safer place. Our ancient traditions are built on communication and trust, and if we each hold fast to these, we will prevail.’
>
> Polls suggest that Wrench has a narrow lead over Mr Punch going into tomorrow morning, but everything could change on the day.

Ivy swallowed. ‘Did you read that bit at the end?’

‘Hang on, I’m not as fast as you.’ Seb was still focused on the foot of the page.

Mr Littlefair set two pairs of spectacles down on the table, which instantly transformed into pint glasses. He filled them with water and Coke respectively before moving on. Seb looked up. ‘Thanks.’ He grabbed his drink and took a long slurp. ‘I don’t get it. Octavius Wrench was standing for election to fight the Dirge, but *he* was one of them. And what’s all that stuff about the races of the dead?’

Ivy remembered the portrait of Octavius in his study. She wondered how she and Seb would even begin to tell Granma Sylvie that her father was responsible for the kidnapping of children and the deaths of innocent people. It would break her heart. Even Ivy felt ashamed, and Octavius didn’t exactly feel like part of her family. ‘Maybe he was on a power trip.’ She recalled how Ethel had described the Dirge: secretive, calculating and ruthless. They had fooled everyone. It seemed likely that they’d infiltrated as much of Lundinor as they could.

‘Do you think this all has something to do with why Granma ran away on Twelfth Night?’ Seb asked. ‘She might have found out about Octavius being in the Dirge and been too frightened to stay.’

Ivy picked up her glass. ‘That doesn’t sound like Granma Sylvie.’ The Granma Sylvie she knew would never have run away from anything. She was always telling Ivy to face her problems head on. ‘There must be something else we’re missing.’

As she took a sip of water, Ivy cast her eyes thoughtfully around the dining room. She spotted Violet Eyelet sitting in a booth opposite, eating a piece of cake topped with glowing orange cream. As she looked on a group of tall men and women swept in, heading for a table in the centre. The ladies wore long taffeta gowns, while the men were in trousers or floor-length tunics. They glided over the floor as if they were on wheels.

‘Seb . . .’ Ivy whispered, unsettled by this. ‘Look at them. Is it just me or is there something not quite . . . ?’

She didn’t need to finish her sentence. Before taking their seats, they all removed their various overcoats, capes and hats. As one of the women’s long skirts lifted, Ivy realized that there was nothing between her and the floor.

Nothing. As in absolutely nothing. Just air.

Ivy couldn’t take her eyes off them. She watched one man with curly black hair lay his cavalier’s hat down on the chair opposite. Instead of reaching *over* the table, however, his hand went straight *through* it.

She grabbed Seb’s arm. ‘Did you see that?’

Seb was transfixed. ‘Yeah. Whatever uncommon thing he’s using, we need to get us one. We could pretty much walk through walls with that.’

On the other side of the room, Violet Eyelet caught their eyes. She looked at the floating uncommoners and then came shuffling across the dining room, cake plate in hand.

‘Try and take some deep breaths,’ she told them. ‘It’s always a shock the first time you realize they’re dead.’ She sat down next to Seb, her huge skirt billowing up like a marshmallow.

‘Dead?’ Seb batted the skirt out of his face. ‘*What?!*’

Ivy looked back at the group: the innkeeper had already taken their orders and now they were chatting as they waited for their drinks.

‘What do you mean *dead*?’ she asked.

Violet smiled nervously as she put down her plate. ‘Well, the thing is, Lundinor isn’t just home to *living* traders; it opens its gates to dead ones too. When an uncommon object is formed, only *part* of a soul gets trapped inside; the rest turns into one of the dead. There are hundreds of different races.’ She lowered her thick spectacles to study the floating figures. ‘I think those might be ghouls. You can always tell because ghouls can’t be earthed – they wear long clothes to *cover the gap*.’

Ivy went rigid in her seat. No one else in the dining room seemed the least bit concerned about the ghouls; indeed, they looked quite friendly.

They can’t be dead, she thought. *They’re walking around.*

‘Oh, I know it seems rather creepy,’ Violet went on. ‘Believe me, when I first found out about the dead, I kept looking over my shoulder, expecting things to jump out of shadows. But it isn’t like that; at least, not any more. The dead and the living mix together happily now. When I was a little girl, it was exciting finding out about the dead – about all the new races being discovered, and what they could do. A new list was published every year in *Farrow’s Guide for the Travelling Tradesman*.’

Seb, who was looking rather pale, swallowed and raised his empty glass. ‘Excuse me?’ he said, looking up. Ivy turned round and saw Mr Littlefair.

‘Can I get some of that Hundred stuff please?’ Seb asked. ‘The one that makes you feel good?’ He ran a shaky hand through his hair and stared at Ivy. ‘I never thought I’d ever say this and mean it, but *I see dead people*. I need sugar to help me deal with that.’

Ivy smiled weakly, knowing exactly how he felt. *I can handle this,* she told herself. She’d got over uncommon objects; she could deal with dead people . . . walking around. She looked at the newspaper article and picked out the phrase *members of the dead*. ‘Were the dead ever involved with the Dirge?’ she asked Violet.

‘The D—?’ Violet clamped her lips together. ‘You mean, the Fallen Guild?’ she whispered.

‘Yes,’ Ivy said, forgetting that no one used their true name. ‘Did the dead ever have anything to do with them?’

Violet’s spectacles dropped further down her nose as she bent her head. ‘Yes, of course. Many of the races of the dead worked for the Fallen Guild when they were at their most powerful. It was just one dead attack after another back then. On Twelfth Night 1969, it was the dead that fought on the side of the Fallen Guild – but no one talks about that any more. It was a long time ago. The dead have been law-abiding citizens for decades; they've tried to put the mistakes of the past behind them.'

Ivy remembered what Ethel had said about the Dirge raising an army of sorts. She must have meant an army of the dead. She pictured a troop of zombies staggering towards her, and shuddered. It was easy to see why everyone was so eager to believe that the Dirge had gone.

Ivy heard something fizzing, and turned to find Valian standing beside her, a tankard of frothy black liquid in his hand. It smelled like aniseed. 'Thought you might like some company.' He squashed into the booth beside them.

Seb grabbed his pint glass right after the innkeeper had filled it with Hundred Punch, and started slugging it down, glowering at Valian as he did so.

'The thing to know about the races of the dead is that they're just like the races of the living – some are good, some are bad,' Valian explained.

Great, Ivy thought. *He's been listening, then.*

'Mostly they're hired to do illegal stuff, 'cos they don't mind breaking the rules and it's difficult to impose GUT law on creatures that can move faster than light, or disappear, or fly.'

Ivy thought back to the talking wolf in the Wrench Mansion. She had thought she'd seen it poke its nose *through* the iron gates. 'That wolf,' she said to Valian. 'Was it dead?'

'Yes.'

'A dead wolf?' Violet mused. 'Ooh, it must have been a grim-wolf. They're meant to be very shy.'

Ivy was fairly certain 'shy' wasn't the right word to describe it.

'The question isn't what the wolf is,' Valian said. 'It's *whose* it is. It must have been working for somebody.'

'For the Dirge,' Ivy said coldly. 'It was there, at Granma's house yesterday.'

'Members of the Fallen Guild were at Sylvie's house?' Violet exclaimed. 'No, there must be some mistake. They disbanded decades ago. It's not possible.' She shook her head, her glasses wobbling.

Seb ignored her and leaned forward. 'The wolf said that it had a mistress,' he remembered. 'So one of the members of the Dirge must be a woman.'

‘*Wolfsbane,*’ Ivy remembered. ‘That was the door it came out of in the Hexroom. And it asked us where we’d hidden *it* – whatever it is the Dirge want from Granma Sylvie.’

Violet muttered to herself while pushing cake crumbs around her plate. ‘The Fallen Guild . . . all those years . . .’

Ivy watched the crumbs curiously. They reminded her of something. ‘The dust on the Hexroom floor . . .’ she said. ‘It had only been disturbed in two places. One was outside the Wolfsbane door, but the other was in front of the wooden door belonging to Ragwort. I think they’re the only doors that have been opened.’

Seb placed his glass down on the table. ‘Wolfsbane and Ragwort.’

Ivy shivered. ‘Do you think *they* took Mum and Dad? Do you think they’re both still in Lundinor?’ She looked around the room.

‘You’ve already seen one of them,’ Seb reminded her. ‘That man with the creepy hands in Bletchy Scrubb hospital.’

The man in grey. Ivy didn’t think Seb had been listening when she told him she suspected he was a member of the Dirge. ‘If Wolfsbane is a woman, then the man in grey must be Ragwort,’ she said.

‘Exactly. And right now they could be anyone. We can’t trust men or women, dead or not, or people wearing gloves. That’s, like, everyone in Lundinor.’

Ivy glanced warily at Valian and Violet. They couldn’t trust *anyone*.

Chapter Twenty-three

In the dusty case of the uncommon alarm clock I see Mum's face appear out of the darkness. Her eyes are squeezed shut in pain, her lips black. Her wispy brown hair begins to whiten and her face lengthens into that of another . . . Dad. His glasses are smashed, his blue eyes wide with fear. There is blood streaked across his cheeks. For unbearable moments I watch him – until finally his mouth rips open in a scream, tears falling freely to his chin. The spindly hands of the uncommon alarm clock begin to whirl, blurring his face. They whir around, getting faster and faster. The air rushes out of my lungs. Panic begins to fill me like rising water. I can't . . . move . . .

This is it. I haven't been able to save them . . . My parents are going to die.

The alarm clock rings—

'Ivy? Ivy!'

Seb's voice pierced Ivy's mind. The alarm clock dissolved into darkness. She struggled for air.

'Ivy, wake up!'

Groggily she opened her eyes and heaved herself upright. The bedroom light was on. Seb was standing in front of her, already dressed. She rubbed her eyes. 'What time is it?'

Seb shook his head. 'It's early,' he said. 'Are you OK? It sounded like you were having a nightmare.'

Ivy glanced at the uncommon alarm clock on the chair by her bunk. 'I'm fine – it's just . . . we don't have much time. There's only one day left.'

Seb reached for the clock. In the quiet of the bedroom they could hear it ticking. 'Every step we take, it's like I can feel it getting closer,' he murmured. ‘I keep wanting to shout at someone, you know? I want to ask *why* this is happening to us. What did we do to deserve it?’

Ivy felt angry too, but she had tried to push the feeling away. Her mum had told her once that anger could burn you up if you weren’t careful.

Seb put down the alarm clock. ‘We have no time to lose. I’m gonna go and ask some questions. Someone must know something about Granma that’ll give us a clue. I’ll meet you back in the dining room in an hour.’ He paused. ‘You know how Dad always says, *We just need a bit of luck*? Well, that’s what I feel like right now.’ He sighed as he opened the door. ‘Do you think he’s OK – I mean, wherever they’ve got him?’

Ivy shook her head. It was bad enough that her mum and dad weren’t there. The idea of them locked away somewhere in the Dirge’s control made her go cold inside. ‘Hey,’ she said. ‘Keep an eye on Valian.’

Seb’s mouth drew into a line. ‘I’ll try and lose him the first chance I get.’

After the door shut behind him, Ivy sat up in bed, thinking. Seb was right. There was no way they’d solve this without a bit of luck. Luck was the only reason they’d found the Wrench Mansion in the first place, and even after their visit yesterday, they still knew very little about what was going on; they were no closer to rescuing their parents.

Ivy threw back her duvet and got up. As her feet touched the floor, her skin prickled. She had the distinct – and very strange– feeling that something was watching her. She looked around, but there was nothing but old furniture and shadows. The uncommon wallpaper had rearranged itself into an ornate lamp, which was standing proudly on the floor. Ivy sighed. She hadn’t woken up properly.

Before heading downstairs she put Scratch in her pocket. It would be nice not to be totally alone; for some reason talking to Scratch yesterday had made her feel better. Maybe it was because he was one of the few uncommon objects in which she could see all that was good about Lundinor. She stuffed Thaddeus Kandinsky’s copy of *Lundinor: Farrow’s Guide for the Travelling Tradesman* in her pocket too. After Violet had mentioned it yesterday, Ivy thought she’d have another go at reading it.

She entered the dining room expecting Valian to be waiting for her, but he was nowhere to be seen. Mr Littlefair told her that he had followed Seb outside earlier.

Ivy gazed around the room. A couple of traders were gobbling down the last of their breakfast, while two waitresses were busy clearing up after the main rush. A half-empty dish of what looked like custard was making strange whistling noises in the corner.

Ivy went back to the door. There was no point waiting around. She would see what she could learn on her own and meet Seb in an hour.

Out on the Gauntlet she reached into her pocket and pressed the lever on Scratch's side. 'Any advice where to go?' she asked. The street was already filling up with uncommoners. Traders were rolling back awnings, sweeping tables clean and unloading their wares.

'Trying the other quarters?' he suggested.

Ivy dodged a small, portly man carrying a bundle of hay on his shoulders. 'The other quarters?'

'Undermarts always be quarters divided into,' Scratch said. 'Why that's four quartermasters in charging. Lundinor quarters namings: the Great Cavern – beings of the biggest – the East End, the West End, and then of the Dead End.'

Remembering the ghouls in the dining room, Ivy gulped. 'The Dead End?'

'Yes, yes,' Scratch said. 'Tradings for the dead there happens.'

'Right.' Ivy ran a hand through her curls. *Best to avoid that one then.* 'What about the other two?'

Scratch jingled. 'Expensive beings the West End. All sellers furniture, of boutiques fashion and cafés. Opposite beings the East End.'

Ivy stopped at a crossroads and felt a sudden chill. She looked over her shoulder, sensing someone following her, but she could see no one. She shook her head before continuing. That nightmare she'd experienced was just making her paranoid.

She wondered where the Granma Sylvie from that old photo would have gone when she was in Lundinor. The Wrenches seemed quite posh – their house was huge. But Ivy had the feeling that Granma Sylvie wasn't like them. She'd been best friends with Ethel, after all. 'Which way to the East End?'

Scratch nudged her hand. 'Leftings.'

As Ivy walked, she saw that the drains at the side of the road were glossy with moisture. It looked silver, like snail slime. She wondered if it rained in Lundinor. Maybe there was something uncommon that could do that . . . It was odd to have drains underground otherwise.

She passed a young man in a cloth cap, galoshes and kipper tie, who was selling uncommon tea-strainers – the kind Ivy's mum used. The man held the strainer in front of him and gave it a gentle tap. With a scraping sound, the object stretched to the size of a washing basket. Now, every hole was filled with a rolled sheet of canvas.

'Uncommon tea-strainers!' the man called. 'Great for storage – hold all your important documents in your pocket.' He slotted a roll of paper into an empty hole. The tea-strainer promptly returned to its former size with a clean *snikt*. 'Only two grade! Best you'll find in Lundinor!'

The man's stall was full of strange trading memorabilia – chalkboards, scales, old gloves, tin signs. Hanging from a pole at the top was a print of a poem entitled 'Grading'.

> 1 and 2 are easy to view,
> 3 and 4 take a bit more,
> 5 is a search,
> 6 is a quest,
> Finding 7 demands your best.
> 8 is every true scout's dream,
> While 9 has only thrice been seen.
> But the find that beguiles all trading men is that rarest of rare – the Great Grade 10.

Ivy watched as a smartly dressed man bartered for a tea-strainer. No money changed hands; only objects. The stallholder handed over one of his tea-strainers, while the man tendered a spoon and two feathers in return. Afterwards they shook hands.

She puzzled over it as she continued. Uncommon objects must be exchanged, she figured, not bought. They were graded one to ten and then swapped. A bit like comics or trading cards.

As she turned a corner, she got a whiff of something nasty – sewage or overflowing rubbish bins – but it was gone in a moment, as if carried away on a breeze. At the end of the road a crowd had formed. Beyond them, some uncommoners in long white robes were singing.

Ivy moved in closer to listen.

‘. . . *let yourselves be light, from now on our troubles will be out of sight* . . .’

The choir was performing *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, a song Ivy had heard on the radio at home. Each voice seemed to soar, lifting Ivy up with it. The tune reminded her of Christmas Day: her mum laughing while cooking lunch and her dad cracking jokes as she and Seb helped him set the table.

All at once Ivy noticed that there was something odd about the singers. Their skin appeared to be glowing, and when she checked the ground beneath them, their white robes faded into thin air.

Scratch tinkled in Ivy’s pocket. ‘Spectres beautiful,’ he said to her. ‘Favourite they Scratch are.’

So that’s what they are, she thought. *A race of the dead.* She had to admit that spectres didn’t look scary at all. She wondered if she’d got the wrong impression of the dead. Maybe what Valian said was true. The dead were just like the living. Most were good, but there were also a few bad apples.

She got *Farrow’s Guide* out of her pocket and looked around: she was heading down a dimly lit street bordered on one side by a shallow trench of stagnant water. It smelled foul, like rotten vegetables, so Ivy assumed it was some kind of sewer. She held a sleeve over her nose as she continued.

There were no stalls here; the pavements were empty. Ahead, on the cobbled road, stood a cement mixer, a heap of broken masonry and a pile of sand. Someone had evidently been making some repairs. The shops were all shut. Hand-scrawled wooden signs announced: *Closing Down Sale* or *Moving* or *Find Our New Store in the West End!*

Ivy looked at the drain and wondered if the smell had driven everyone away. Rivulets of soapy water still ran between the cobbles; maybe someone had been trying to clean up. She turned her attention back to *Farrow’s Guide*. There must be a reason why it seemed like utter nonsense; she had no idea how it was meant to be helpful otherwise.

Or do I?

‘Maybe it’s a code,’ she whispered to herself. That way, if the guide got into common hands, no one would be able to read it. She turned to a page in the middle and tried to spot a pattern in the first line of text.

Seva nr chak tec halbeht nitniots pep theede . . .

She groaned. It was impossible. It was like someone had got the guide and shaken it up so that the letters fell into all kinds of random places. Everything was upside down and back to fr—

Ivy quickly reached into her coat pocket. ‘Scratch,’ she said. ‘Can you read this to me?’

She held him above the page. Asking a bell with no eyes to read something was probably the stupidest thing she’d ever done, but Scratch had said that you didn’t always need eyes to see.

‘Scratch readings is back-to-fronted problem too,’ he admitted.

‘That’s perfect,’ Ivy encouraged. ‘Just read exactly what you see.’

‘Huh-hum.’ Scratch coughed before beginning. ‘*Entrance to the Dead End of Lundinor is only possible via the Well at the World’s End, the deepest point in the Blackheath caverns. Once here, the answer to a simple riddle gives traders access to the markets on the other side.*’

It worked! ‘Go on,’ Ivy said. ‘You’re doing really well.’

Scratch vibrated. ‘*Common races of the dead you may meet on your travels are: one, ghosts (also known as wisps, geists and gwei). Ghosts represent only a vague trace of a soul, and have no powers to substantiate. They are the least powerful of the races and are characterized by their dizzy, disorientated characters, which make them unsuitable for serious roles in trade. Because of their fleeting form they can travel huge distances in seconds, and before the advent of featherlight mail in the seventeenth century, ghosts were used to pass messages over long distances. The Great Chinese Whisper Calamity of 1549 is said to have been caused by one particular gwei who failed to deliver a message accurately because, as one witness reported, he was “not all there”.*’

Ivy felt more hopeful. Just think what else the guide might contain! She would ask Scratch to read the maps next, and then anything that might tell her what the market was like back when Granma Sylvie was trading.

‘*Two, Eyre Folk,*’ Scratch continued with a jingle. ‘*Easily recognized by their pale skin and inhuman speed and strength, Eyre Folk are likely to be responsible for the common “vampire” myth because of their uncontrollable tendency to “spook” – a physical reaction to a heightened emotional state, during which their skin appears to sweat blood.*’ Scratch suddenly stopped. ‘Ivy, Ivy. Everything not some right.’

Ivy heard a splash. She looked back at the drain and spotted a stream of thick, slimy water flowing into the road, oozing towards her. It had a familiar silvery sheen.

'Ivy, get here out!' Scratch shouted, shaking violently. 'Get here out!'

'Wh-what's happening?' Ivy stammered, stuffing Scratch and the guide into her pocket as she ran. She checked back over her shoulder. The glistening trail had slithered across the cobbles after her and split in two, pinning her in on the opposite pavement.

She hadn't been imagining it; something *had* been following her.

Slime.

Only, it's not just slime, is it?

With a sound like a burp, a large dark *thing* rose up out of the gloop. The back of Ivy's neck prickled as the creature made its way towards her, dragging its huge body over the cobbles. It was roughly person-shaped, with broad shoulders and a scaly lower half that disappeared into the sludge. Its skin was covered in long dripping hair the colour of seaweed; it looked like something out of an old monster movie.

Ivy hurriedly weighed up her options. There was no escape route – the shops were closed; the street was deserted. She wondered if she could outrun the creature. It was taking a long time to reach her, sticking to the part of the road that was wet. Maybe it could only move on water. Ivy glanced over her shoulder at the pile of sand beside the cement mixer. Could she somehow use the sand against this monster . . . ?

Before she could make a move, the slimy water around her sizzled, and a huge brown wave roared up out of it – two metres tall and full of floating plastic bottles, seaweed and driftwood. Ivy covered her eyes with her hand as spray pelted her face. The stench of salt filled the air. She blinked, lost her footing and fell to the ground.

The water made a loud sputtering noise. Then Ivy heard a voice; it sounded like it came from underwater.

'Little girl,' it said, bubbling away, 'where have you hidden it?'

Not this again. 'Hidden *what*?' she rasped, struggling to her feet. 'What do you want?'

She stretched up on tiptoe, trying to see over the wall of water that surrounded her. It was no use. Everything behind it was blurry and distorted. Except for . . .

Just then, from within the sheet of water, a face emerged, followed by a body. Ivy saw a pair of hollow muddy eyes and rows of teeth like a shark's. 'The Great Uncommon Good,' it said, frothing at the mouth. 'You know where it is.' It smiled devilishly, showing off those teeth. 'Tell me.'

Before panic overtook Ivy completely, she heard the cement mixer rattling beside her and remembered the sand. She just had to be within reach . . .

'Well, little girl,' the creature bubbled. 'Can you answer my question?'

'What makes you think I have it?' Ivy said, inching backwards. She could feel the edge of the sand pile behind her.

'Don't play games with me,' the creature hissed.

Scratch was trembling in Ivy's pocket; she hoped what she was about to do might save them both. She dug the toe of her welly into the sand, then kicked as hard as she could.

A cloud of sand lifted into the air, covering the monster. It roared angrily before its face disappeared. For a brief second the wall of water surrounding Ivy flickered.

'*HELP!*' she shouted, dragging air into her lungs. '*SOMEBODY HELP ME!*'

Suddenly there was another voice: 'Ivy!'

'*Help!*' she screamed. She tried to see through the water. *Seb?* No. The voice had sounded different . . . stronger. 'Valian?' she called.

'Stay there,' he replied. 'Don't move!'

'Ivy! I'm here!' Now *that* was Seb. *Yelling*.

A narrow gap appeared in the water; something small and glittery shot through it. Ivy looked down. A candy-pink yo-yo had landed by her foot. 'What am I meant—?'

'Don't speak!' Valian shouted. 'Either of you. Selkies can only read your mind while you're talking!'

Selkies . . . ? Ivy shivered. *That name was familiar.* She'd read it in the newspaper they'd found in the Wrench Mansion. It had said that selkies used to work for the Dirge.

She crouched down and carefully picked up the yo-yo, keeping one eye on the selkie. It was staring at her with wide, hungry eyes, as if she was the prize turkey on display in a butcher's window.

Ivy was so terrified, she barely felt her whispering work when she touched the toy. It was uncommon, but she had no idea what it did.

The selkie's eyes focused on the yo-yo. Ivy was about to try throwing it as you would a normal yo-yo when an ear-shattering scream resounded along the street. The wall of water vibrated like a hurricane had just hit it. Ivy dropped to her knees, her hands clamped over her ears. It felt like they were burning. She winced and tried to look up, her eyes watering from the pain.

The selkie's throat vibrated as it screamed, its jaw hanging open. Her head pounding, Ivy imagined what an uncommon yo-yo might do. *They go away and come back to you . . . They work with gravity . . . You throw them . . . They spin until they hit the ground . . .*

Wait – they spin . . .

She removed one hand from her ear, flinching as the piercing scream broke through. Looping the string around her finger, she aimed the yo-yo at the selkie and flicked her wrist.

A cyclone burst out of the pink yo-yo, pulling the wall of water round in circles. In an explosion of foam, the selkie was sucked into the whirlpool. Its cries started to break up as its body flashed in and out of view.

In between the selkie's scream, Ivy caught Valian's voice.

'On three!' he shouted.

On three? Do what *on three?*

'One . . .'

Ivy panicked, looking around. Maybe he'd thrown her something else to use.

'Two . . .'

There was nothing: just water, a very angry selkie and the yo-yo.

'Three!'

At the last second she did the only thing she could think of: she let go of the yo-yo.

The selkie scream was cut off, and she saw rushing water and bubbles. The yo-yo rose above her head, taking the whirlpool with it. Below, she could finally see through to the street. She dashed underneath the water and out the other side.

Valian was standing there, soaking wet and covered in slime, holding a bath plug suspended from a length of silver chain. 'Get back,' he warned sharply.

Seb dragged Ivy away from the maelstrom. She looked over her shoulder as Valian took aim and threw the bath plug into the centre of the whirlpool.

The selkie gave one last stomach-curdling scream, and then, with an almighty guzzling sound, the whirlpool disappeared into the ground. The bath plug and the yo-yo hit the cobbles with a thud.

Ivy's legs almost gave way as she tried to stand.

Seb bent down to help her. 'Ivy, are you all right?'

'What's the Great Uncommon Good?' she spluttered. 'That's what the Dirge want. That's what they're after.'

Chapter Twenty-four

A long grey feather bobbed in the air in front of Ivy's eyes. She tried swatting it away, but it swooped under her hand and started writing.

'Great,' Valian groaned, at her shoulder. 'It's from Ethel.'

Ivy had no idea how he knew that – maybe Ethel only used pigeon feathers. Whatever the feather was, it started writing:

> *Valian Kaye,*
>
> *You and I had a deal. I have already fulfilled my half of the agreement; in return you were meant to keep Ivy and Sebastian safe.*
>
> *But what's this I hear about a selkie attack . . . in the STREET! And where were you?*
>
> *Utterly reprehensible behaviour.*
>
> *You call yourself a scout . . .*

Ivy turned away as the feather continued its message, but she saw Valian rolling his eyes as it went on and on.

She sat down on a bench beneath one of the streetlamps. Seb hid a grin at Valian's misfortune as he slumped beside her. They were back on the Gauntlet and the air was filled with the enthusiastic calls of traders, the babble of chatter and the swish and shuffle of Hobsmatch. The noises of Lundinor were becoming more familiar to Ivy and, after the terrifying cries of the selkie, they sounded warm and friendly.

'I'm sorry I didn't get there sooner,' Seb said, staring into his lap. 'I noticed you'd taken Scratch with you – that's how Valian tracked you on one of his scouting maps. I don't wanna think about what would have happened if we hadn't got there in time.' He turned to look at her. 'It was stupid of me to go off like that this morning. We have to stick together.'

Ivy sniffed. She could still taste the selkie slime. 'That's one of the last things Dad said to me,' she said. '*Make sure you and Seb stay together*.'

'I hope Mum and Dad are together, wherever they are.'

Ivy looked into her brother's big green eyes. She'd never noticed the similarity before, but now she realized they were exactly like hers.

'At least now we've got another clue to help save them,' she said. 'What do you think the Great Uncommon Good is? That's what the Dirge want.'

Seb shrugged. 'It sounds like something famous, something historical. Wolfsbane and Ragwort must have sent the selkie after you to see if it could read your mind and find out where it is.' He shivered as he finished.

'What's wrong?' Ivy asked.

Seb lowered his head. 'It's just – what we read in that newspaper about the Dirge causing an uprising of the dead . . . It's happening again.'

Before Ivy could say anything more, Valian came striding over. 'I am *sick* of those lectures.'

Seb looked up. 'All right, whiny. You didn't *have* to read it.'

Valian gave him a sarcastic smile. 'Actually I did. Featherlight doesn't go away unless you've read it all. It just keeps re-writing the message in front of you.'

He brushed down his leather jacket, grimacing as his hand came away shiny with gloop. 'You two need something to defend yourselves with in case there's a next time. I'm not getting another earful from Ethel. Come with me.'

He led Ivy and Seb through the Great Cavern and into the East End. It was a lively place full of the noise of trade, where the air smelled of cooked meat, tar and ale. Ivy tried to banish her memories of the selkie. Scratch had stopped shaking in her pocket; it was time for her to stop shaking too.

Instead, she considered the clue to what the Dirge were after. *The Great Uncommon Good* . . . Seb was right: it *did* sound historical – like an ancient legend. She wondered what or who the Great Uncommon Good was.

The East End streets were crooked and winding, littered with plastic packaging, cardboard and beer cans. Some shops had smashed windows boarded up, while others had put up fairy lights and scrawled cardboard signs.

‘One shiny new straddlebroom!’ a trader with a thick accent shouted. ‘Only one point two grade, ladies and gents – cheapest in Lundinor!’

‘One grade ha-ats, one grade ha-ats – change your guise in moments, one grade ha-ats!’ sang another.

Valian stalked confidently through the crowds and then turned off onto a quiet side street. As she followed, Ivy began to reconsider his motives. She hadn’t trusted him, but he’d risked his life to save her from the selkie . . . She had so many questions.

‘What’s the Great Uncommon Good?’ she asked him.

‘No idea.’ He shrugged. ‘Where did you hear that?’

Ivy glanced at Seb. ‘The selkie mentioned it – it asked me where I’d hidden it.’

Valian frowned as he led them into a narrow alley. This one was filled only with shadows, rubbish bins and the putrid smell of rotting fruit. ‘I wouldn’t take any notice of a selkie. They’ve been banned from undermarts for hundreds of years because they like violence.’ He stopped and turned to the closest building, exploring the brickwork as if searching for something lodged in the cement. ‘Selkies can read minds; they can tap into your darkest secrets and deepest memories, and you only have to be speaking aloud to give them access.’ He glanced at Ivy. ‘You got off lightly. Normally selkie victims look like they’ve been attacked by a shark. Whatever the thing said, it was probably just trying to keep you talking for longer.’

So it could read my mind, Ivy thought. But why did the Dirge think she knew where the Great Uncommon Good was? It didn’t make sense.

At last Valian’s fingers stopped; he pressed his nails into the cement and waited. ‘Try to be nice,’ he told Ivy and Seb. ‘Despite appearances, this guy’s actually a decent contact. He’s a scout like me.’

Suddenly a loud crack reverberated along the alleyway. The bricks trembled, sending out sprays of sand. ‘Stand back,’ Valian commanded, shouldering them away.

Ivy stared as a diamond-shaped section of wall dissolved into mist and shadow. She stepped backwards, grabbing Seb’s hoodie as she did so. There was a lot of coughing, a loud hiss, and then a dark figure formed in the mist.

‘Young Valian Kaye,’ the figure said – it was an amused male voice. ‘Nice of you to stop by for a visit.’

Valian coughed and looked away.

'How's business?' the man asked, his face still shrouded in darkness. 'It's got to be a difficult time for an independent scout at the mo. In fact, the last time I saw you, weren't you trying to flog assassin shoelaces to a couple of gwei?'

Ivy listened carefully. The man definitely had an accent, but she couldn't quite place it. All at once he stepped forward into the dim streetlight, grinning. His crooked teeth, sandy hair and pale skin were blackened with something like soot, and beneath a tatty waistcoat he wore a once-white shirt over faded jeans. On his head was a red and blue jester's hat. Ivy looked down at his feet. His muddy trainers didn't touch the ground.

Her stomach flinched. He was floating. Which meant . . .

He's dead.

'Well then, Kaye, introduce me,' the man said, nodding towards Ivy and Seb.

Valian shifted uneasily. After telling him their names, he pointed at the dead man. 'You two, this is Johnny Hands – a ghoul with a special gift for matching weapons to owners.'

Ivy shuddered. *A ghoul*. Just like those traders in the tavern.

Johnny Hands smiled wickedly and then made a little bow, removing his jester's hat as he bent forward. 'Pleased to meet you,' he announced. Ivy caught his eye, and his grin widened.

Valian stepped forward. 'You know why we've come.' He beckoned to Ivy and Seb. 'They need something to protect themselves with; something that won't be detected on common land.'

Johnny Hands scratched his filthy chin. He looked Ivy and Seb up and down and then reached into the black mist behind him, bringing out three packages, each wrapped in stained muslin and tied with string.

'This one for the boy.' He handed Seb the largest of the three packages. It was long and thin, like a ruler. 'Not very subtle but it'll do some damage if you're attacked.'

Seb took the package and studied it, looking both confused and fearful.

'You're a little trickier . . .' Johnny Hands narrowed his eyes at Ivy. 'Something small like you perhaps? Or something quick and lethal?'

Lethal? Ivy couldn't believe he was saying this. She was *eleven*. What did she want with a lethal weapon? Then again, it would be helpful if she came face to face with another selkie.

The ghoul glanced at Valian for a second. ‘Perhaps . . . something you are familiar with.’ He handed Ivy the smaller of the two remaining packages. It was round and fairly heavy, like a cricket ball. ‘And this one’s for you . . .’ he finished, handing the third package to Valian.

‘I didn’t ask for anything,’ Valian protested. ‘I just wanted weapons for these two.’

Johnny Hands raised a glove. ‘I know, I know, but you’ll understand when you see theirs.’

‘What have you been up to, Hands?’ Valian growled.

‘I’ll just put it on your tab, yes? Great. No need to shake.’ Johnny Hands quickly stepped back into the darkness.

Ivy watched as, one by one, his features were enveloped by the mist. If he really *was* dead, then he might have been trading in Lundinor for decades; centuries even – to her knowledge, there wasn’t an expiry date on death.

‘Mr Hands – wait,’ she said, trying to keep her voice level.

He paused, only his face still visible. ‘What is it?’

Ivy swallowed. ‘I was wondering, have you heard of the Great Uncommon Good?’

He cocked his head. ‘A whisper here and there, yes. It is a legend. A very ancient one.’

‘Can you tell us anything about it?’ Seb asked, stepping forward. ‘Anything at all? It’s important.’

‘Alas, no.’ Johnny Hands winked as his face was finally absorbed into the shadows, leaving just his lips behind. ‘You’ll need to ask something much older than me,’ he whispered. ‘And I’m five hundred and forty-two.’

Chapter Twenty-five

The desk bell announced their arrival. '*Miss Ivy Sparrow! Mr Sebastian Sparrow! Mr Valian Kaye!*' It paused, and then screeched, much louder, '*ETHEL?*'

Ivy heard the clink of metal and the groan of something heavy being moved in the storeroom.

'Aha!' Ethel came striding through the door. She was wearing a stained cotton apron and held some yellow wadding in her hand. Ivy caught the acrid whiff of chemicals and guessed that Ethel had been polishing her bells. 'Decided to show your face then, have you, Kaye?'

Valian shuffled in. The bells on the walls immediately started muttering rude things about him. Ivy struggled not to giggle – she didn't want to make it worse; he'd already been cursing her the whole way there.

It was Ivy who had insisted they go and see Ethel. Seb had been right about the Great Uncommon Good – it sounded historical because it was. Ivy didn't know anything older than five hundred and forty-two, like Johnny Hands, but she did know someone who might. She glanced at Ethel's bells as she made her way around the shop. Some of them dated back over a thousand years.

While Ethel made tea, the three of them sat around the desk with their packages from Johnny Hands laid out in front of them. The bells were chattering quietly to themselves, gossiping about everything from Ethel's choice of headscarf to the previous customer. Ivy spotted several that she hadn't noticed on her last visit, all locked away in glass cases. The most interesting were two matte-black ones that looked like they might have been carved from coal. Ivy read the label. It said: hell's bells.

'Bleedin' selkies,' Ethel cursed. 'I don't mind the dead, but never been fond of selkies – too many teeth than is good for a person.' She came through the doorway with a tray and gave Valian a sharp look. 'Still no reason to get them weapons, though.' She pursed her lips but looked down curiously at the three packages. 'Well then . . . You'd better open them up.'

As Ethel set the cups down on the table, Ivy reached forward and began undoing the string around her package. Seb followed suit.

'Nice,' he exclaimed when the muslin fell away. 'That dead guy knows me pretty well.'

Drumsticks. Wooden ones. He picked them up gingerly. 'What do you think they do?'

Ivy looked at her parcel. In the middle of the cloth lay the pink yo-yo she had used earlier to fight the selkie. She turned to Valian. 'I thought this was yours . . .'

'It was.' He glared at his package. 'I expect that's why I've been given this. Compensation.'

'Whoa!' Seb cried. 'Ivy, look!' He was swooshing his drumsticks around, air-drumming over the counter-top. With every beat, a thud sounded on the other side of the room. The blinds in the front window rattled as something wacked them. 'This is awesome. I can hit something from metres away!' He tried sliding the drumsticks up the sleeve of his hoodie. 'And no one would ever know I was carrying them.' He dropped them back out again and began slicing them through the air, aiming for different places on the far wall.

'Careful with those,' Ethel warned. 'You might knock—'

Too late.

Seb thrust both drumsticks downwards, as if smashing a cymbal at the finale of a particularly long riff. At the far end of the shop, a head-sized hole erupted in the wall, showering crumbs of plaster into the air.

The surrounding bells shrieked.

'Ah!'

'Look what you've done!'

Two bells squealed, 'Our wall!' as if they were about to burst into tears.

Ethel headed over to the hole, tutting and shaking her head. 'Now you've done it!' she exclaimed. ''Ow am I meant to fix this?'

Ivy sighed. 'Nice one,' she hissed at Seb. 'We're supposed to be here asking about you know what.'

There was a whispered chorus of 'You know what' from the bells. Ethel stopped inspecting the hole and turned to Ivy. 'What's a you-know-what?' she asked, hand on hip.

Ivy hesitated. ‘Er . . .’ Maybe she should just come out and say it. ‘Have you ever heard of the Great Uncommon Good?’

‘The *what*?’ Ethel frowned and stepped closer. ‘Where did you—?’

Suddenly a furious scratching exploded from the hole in the wall. It sounded like something was stuck inside, trying to get out. The bells squealed and whispered feverishly; Ivy shivered. The noise reminded her of the black feather scratching its message into Granma Sylvie’s wall. ‘What’s that?’ she said. ‘It’s coming from inside the wall.’

Everyone turned to look at the hole. After a moment the scratching stopped. They waited a while longer, but nothing happened.

‘Try saying it again, Ivy,’ Ethel said, her eyes on the wall.

Ivy wasn’t sure what she meant. ‘The Great Uncommon Good . . . ?’

As if on cue, the scratching, shuffling noise started up again.

‘What’s going on ’ere?’ Ethel asked, pushing a gloved hand into the hole. She grimaced as she reached in, searching. Suddenly she went still. ‘’Ang on. There’s something ’ere.’ When she pulled her arm out again, she was holding a wooden box.

All around the shop, the bells were silent. ‘Never seen this before,’ Ethel muttered. As she headed over to the counter, the box started rocking and shaking in her hands. Ivy realized that the box must have been making the scratching sound; Ethel looked like a juggler trying to control it. ‘There, there now,’ Ethel soothed. She set it down on the counter-top and inspected the outside. Ivy did the same.

‘You’d better lean back,’ Ethel said. ‘Just in case.’ The box went still as she opened it. Inside was a lot of stale-smelling straw, which she pulled out in handfuls. Underneath lay two fragile-looking pottery bells, the red-brown colour of clay. Ivy drew closer to take a look at them. They were damaged – their surfaces were cracked and scratched, and covered in water marks.

‘Must’ve been ’ere for years,’ Ethel decided, scratching her head. ‘Probably something my parents collected.’ She looked up at Ivy, Seb and Valian. ‘They ran the ’Ouse of Bells before me.’

Ivy watched as Ethel lifted one of the bells out of the box. It swung a greeting, but no voice rang out. Ivy leaned over and examined the other bell. It looked like it had once been painted, but the design had been washed away. ‘Why can’t it talk?’ she asked.

Ethel peered inside them both. ‘No clangers,’ she said briefly. ‘They’ve been taken out.’

Ivy brought a hand to her mouth. There was something horrific about a talking bell with no clanger – like a person with no tongue.

‘Tortured,’ Ethel murmured as she rested them gently down on the counter. ‘Must ’ave been. I’ve heard reports of it happening to bells before. The Dirge were known to do it.’

Deep in Ivy’s pocket, Scratch shivered. She felt a stab of anger. ‘That’s so cruel. Why?’

Ethel ran her fingers across each bell’s damaged surface. ‘They must have information the Dirge didn’t want anyone else to know.’ She looked closer at the decoration on the outside. ‘They look like story bells; they’re designed to recount whatever tale is painted on their surface.’

Valian scrutinized them suspiciously. ‘So what story was it? It must have been pretty interesting for your parents to have hidden them in the wall.’

Seb inspected them from a distance, still looking embarrassed by the damage he’d caused. ‘They moved after Ivy said *The Great Uncommon Go* —’

Before Seb had even finished his sentence, both bells were swinging wildly.

‘OK, OK,’ Ethel hushed, stroking them. ‘It’s all right.’ She pulled up a chair and sat down, stirring her tea. ‘Story bells . . .’ She frowned as she stared into her cup.

Eventually she looked up. ‘My parents used to tell me this fairy story when I was a girl,’ she said, as if just remembering. ‘It was about five uncommon objects thought to be grade ten or beyond.’

Valian raised an eyebrow. ‘Some fairy story.’

Ivy remembered the poem she’d read in the street that morning. *The Great Grade Ten* . . . No one had ever found one before.

Ethel coughed disapprovingly before continuing. ‘The story went that thousands of years ago, a group of muckers discovered five truly extraordinary uncommon objects, which they used to wield great power in the common world. The very first uncommoners fought those muckers and won. They managed to get the five objects to safety, where they were hidden for hundreds of years – until the next common fool tried to get ’old of ’em. The uncommoners always prevailed in the end. That’s why, according to the fairy story, the five objects occasionally appear in common stories – ancient mythology and the like. The story was called “The Great Uncommon Good”.’

Ivy tensed.

‘That’s not good,’ Seb said. ‘That’s definitely *not good*.’

Ethel sipped her tea. ‘Like I said, it’s just a fairy tale. I think these bells must have told the story before they were tortured. That’s probably where my parents got it from. But why the Dirge would want to—’

‘That selkie,’ Valian interrupted, visibly shaken. ‘It asked you about the Great Uncommon Good?’

Ivy nodded. ‘It thought I knew where one of them was. The Dirge *must* be looking for one of the Great Uncommon Good,’ she told Ethel. ‘That’s what Granma Sylvie’s stolen from them. And now they want it back.’

‘*What?*’ Ethel’s face drained of colour. She looked at each of them in turn, and then down at the two story bells. ‘These five objects – *if they really exist* – they’d be extremely dangerous in the ’ands of the Dirge; dangerous to every single mucker and uncommoner on the planet.’

Just then there was a noise in the street outside. Ivy heard voices shouting and hoofbeats ringing on the cobbles.

Valian got up and hurried to the window, pulling back the blinds. ‘It’s just Ugs,’ he murmured. ‘Must be some kind of emergency – they’ve got the coach out.’ He continued watching a moment longer and then turned back. ‘Weird . . . They’ve stopped right outside the—’

‘Sweet Clements!’ Ethel leaped to her feet, sending her chair flying. She held a hand to her chest as a brilliant green parakeet feather flicked through the air in front of her, writing.

Ivy read through the message at lightning speed.

> ***Ethel***,
>
> ***Come quickly. Violet has been attacked. The underguard are on their way, but I need your help.***
>
> ***Derek Littlefair***
> ***Proprietor of the Cabbage Moon Inn***

Chapter Twenty-six

Ivy followed Seb as he elbowed his way through the crowd that had gathered outside the Cabbage Moon. ‘Excuse me!’ he shouted, swiping aside a blue tutu. ‘We need to get through!’

Ivy felt a chill as she passed the underguard’s black coach. There was someone in the back, but the nodding feathered hats and glittering headdresses obscured her view.

Inside the inn Valian and Ethel slammed the door behind them, shutting out the buzz of the crowd.

‘Derek?’ Ethel screeched into the empty lounge. ‘Derek! Where are you?’

A door in the far wall swung open, and they all dashed through, finding themselves in a long galley kitchen. Bowls of freshly prepared vegetables sat next to stone jugs steaming with hot liquids. A pot of Bugtop – Ivy could tell by the aniseed smell – sat frothing on the stove, while above hovered jars, bottles and jugs containing jams, stews and soups.

At the far end stood the doughy-faced innkeeper, Mr Littlefair, fanning himself as he answered questions from a rotund man in underguard uniform. It was the constable Ivy had seen on the doorstep of Granma Sylvie’s house. And if *he* was there, it was likely that he’d be joined by—

‘Smokehart,’ she breathed. The tall, pale officer was standing by the oven with a feather in his hand. Beside him, Violet Eyelet sat slumped on a chair. Ivy winced as she saw that her face was wet with tears. The spectacles hanging round her neck were smashed and her huge dress had been badly singed. Her white hair wobbled as she gestured with her lace-gloved hands.

As Ivy drew closer, she heard what Violet was saying.

‘Like a hundred little black moths it was, at first. I thought they’d all got stuck in the room, so I went to the window to let them out, and then’ – she sniffed, wiping her eye with a lace handkerchief – ‘they kind of swarmed together into a great cloud and turned into darkness; pure darkness with a hundred eyes.'

'Violet!' Ethel hurried over, ignoring Officer Smokehart, and threw both arms around her. 'Are you OK?' She pulled away and assessed her.

Violet sniffed. She looked woozy and disorientated. 'I thought I was a goner, Ethel, honestly. I'd forgotten to put on my specs and stumbled into the wrong room upstairs.' She poked around in her pocket. 'It's all right – I've taken a button for the shock.'

Ethel rubbed her shoulder encouragingly. 'Derek,' she called. 'Best brew up some fresh Raider's Tonic for Violet's injuries.'

Mr Littlefair nodded. 'Right-o!' he said, and started pulling jars out of cupboards, mixing something on the worktop.

Smokehart cleared his throat. 'Ms *Dread.*' His voice sliced through the air. 'As you can see, I am in the middle of an investigation.'

Ethel grumbled but stepped back.

'Now, Violet,' Smokehart began. 'You said that the room you found the creature in was the one next door to your own?' He turned to the innkeeper. 'Who is staying there at the moment, Mr Littlefair?'

Mr Littlefair gulped. 'Just some other paying guests.'

'Indeed.' Smokehart lowered his feather. 'But their names?'

The innkeeper wiped a hand down his apron and looked at Ivy and Seb guiltily. 'Well, er . . . Ivy and Sebastian Sparrow.'

Smokehart's shoulders stiffened. '*Sparrow?*' He quickly spun round to find Ivy and Seb standing behind him.

Ivy shuddered. There was nowhere to go. She winced as he shouted.

'*YOU!*' The feather in his hand shook. 'Grandchildren of Sylvie Wrench. I might have known it.' He threw the feather over his shoulder, where it disappeared into thin air, and marched towards them.

Ethel reacted fast. 'Now wait just a moment.' She jumped into his path, arms spread wide. 'Just because the creature was in their room, it doesn't mean—'

'Ms Dread.' Smokehart smiled at her and pressed his fingers together. 'Do you know what it was that attacked Ms Eyelet?'

Ethel pinched her lips together, falling silent.

'I thought not. It was a wraithmoth.' He let the name hang in the air for a few seconds. Violet squeaked and brought her handkerchief to her mouth. Mr Littlefair stepped back against a cupboard, fanning his flushed cheeks.

‘Wraithmoths are one of the few races of the dead who haven’t been seen since the Fallen Guild were in power,’ Smokehart reminded them. ‘And who, I wonder, is the only person ever to be convicted as a member of the Fallen Guild?’

Every face in the room turned towards Ivy and Seb. Ivy could feel their eyes boring into her.

‘Octavius Wrench is the name you’re all searching for.’ Smokehart moved Ethel aside and continued towards Ivy.

‘Do you know what finally happened to your great-grandfather?’ he asked her.

Ivy glanced anxiously at Seb as he reached for her arm. Everyone must already know the truth about Octavius. She wished someone had had the courage to tell them before.

‘No? Then let me enlighten you . . . After Octavius Wrench lost the election on Twelfth Night 1969, an army of the dead took to the streets of Lundinor, led by six masked figures with rotten hands and black hoods. We all knew who they were.’

The Dirge, Ivy thought. *And Octavius was among them.*

‘I was only a constable at the time, but the entire underguard force – myself included – stood against them. We were completely outnumbered: many good people lost their lives. At the last minute, back-up arrived from other underguard forces around the world. The increase in emergency bag-travel even sparked a geothermal disturbance, creating a temporary snowstorm over London. Only then did the tide start to change.’

Ivy wondered about Granma Sylvie’s accident that night, in the snow. She must have fled Lundinor during the battle.

‘Five of the hooded figures escaped,’ Smokehart recalled, ‘but one fought till the bitter end. When this sixth one realized he wasn’t going to win, he ran into a shower of uncommon bolts and was killed. He was unmasked right there in the street, for everyone to see. Nobody could believe who it really was: *Octavius Wrench*, one of the pillars of the uncommon community.’

Ivy’s mouth was dry. She didn’t know how she was meant to feel about Octavius Wrench. Surely you weren’t automatically bad just because someone in your family was.

Smokehart jabbed a finger at Violet Eyelet. ‘Back then, the Fallen Guild used wraithmoths as spies because they lived in the shadows and you never even noticed they were there till it was too late. Maybe you’d feel a chill, or as if someone was watching you.’

Ivy remembered having that exact feeling that morning, in her room. *The wraithmoth must have been there.* The Dirge had sent it to spy on her, no doubt.

She straightened as Smokehart lowered his finger. He had it all wrong. She had to convince him that she and Seb were innocent and the real bad guys were still out there. ‘Whatever you think about the Wrenches,’ she said in a quiet voice, ‘Seb and I haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘That’s right,’ Seb agreed. ‘We didn’t have anything to do with this. Why would we want to hurt Violet?’

Smokehart glared at them. ‘That’s something I will no doubt discover during your interrogation, but the facts are clear: a wraithmoth was hiding in *your* room, and *your* great-grandfather was a member of the Fallen Guild.’ He lowered his head till he could look Ivy straight in the eye. ‘And on top of that, every instinct I have is telling me that you’re up to something in Lundinor.’

Ivy looked around the room for support. Mr Little-fair shrugged. Violet was sobbing again. Valian . . .

Hang on . . . Where was Valian? Ivy looked behind her. The door was open. *Great.* He’d disappeared again. She wondered if he was going to explain himself this time . . .

Only Ethel stepped forward. ‘Officer, I don’t think—’

She was cut off by the sound of panting and scuttling little footsteps on the tiles behind them. Ivy turned to see a tall, dark-haired lady in a long silk dress approaching from the lounge. There was a sand-coloured dog sniffing around by her ankles. Ivy had seen them both before.

‘Lady Grimes?’ Smokehart exclaimed. ‘What—?’

‘No need to be alarmed, Officer,’ Selena Grimes insisted, raising a dainty hand. ‘I was just passing and wanted to see why the crowd had gathered outside. I heard them talking about a wraithmoth?’

Smokehart straightened the front of his uniform. ‘Yes,’ he said gravely. ‘I’m afraid there is evidence of a wraithmoth attack.’ He slipped a paperclip out of his pocket and gestured towards Ivy and Seb. ‘The creature was found in their room. They’re the Wrench grandchildren I was telling you about.’

Selena Grimes brushed her long fishtail plait over her shoulder and looked from Seb to Ivy. ‘I see.’ She sounded disappointed. ‘It seems I should have allowed you the freedom to question these two back then, Smokehart.’ She tilted her head slightly. ‘I apologize.’

Ethel’s jaw dropped. As she started to protest, Ivy felt the cold, prickly arms of inevitability wrap around her.

Smokehart tossed his paperclip at Ivy; it jumped onto one of her hands. Her whispering kicked in as her wrists were pulled together by some invisible force and the paperclip fastened itself around them. When she tried to pull them apart, it felt like they’d been glued to each other.

‘You are both under arrest for hiring a wraithmoth,’ Smokehart growled, throwing a second paperclip at Seb’s hands. ‘I’ll read you your rights at the station.’

Chapter Twenty-seven

Ivy winced as her head scraped under the doorframe of the underguard coach, Smokehart's bony fingers pressing into her shoulder. Once inside, she shuffled along the seat with her back to the glass and her paper-clipped hands resting on her knees.

Opposite her was another prisoner – a slim, bony man with skin the colour of coffee beans and a short fuzz of black hair on his chin. His Hobsmatch consisted of jeans and a fur-trimmed tabard embroidered with gold flowers. When Ivy caught his eye, he smiled wearily at her. There was an absent look in his turquoise gaze that made her think he wasn't entirely awake.

The coach rocked as Seb was bundled in beside her. She tried to ignore the crowd outside, but it was difficult. Murmurs of 'Fallen Guild' and 'Wrench' kept breaking into hysterical cries or angry shouts. Through the windows, Ivy picked out a few of the faces. They were seething with anger. A woman carrying a basketful of baby's dummies reached into the pile and grabbed one. There was a look of blind rage in her eyes.

'Seb . . .' Ivy began. 'I think that lady—'

Thud! The dummy hit the window and then . . .

Squelch! A horrible yellow mucus sprayed out. The dummy wobbled like jelly as the sound of a loud, rippling *burp!* reverberated through the carriage.

Seb growled and thumped his paperclipped hands hard against the glass. Several other uncommoners grabbed dummies from the woman's basket and started lobbing them at the coach. A wet chorus of belches sounded in Ivy's ears. She realized she'd seen that disgusting gloop before – those boys had been throwing uncommon dummies at the featherlight mailhouse yesterday.

Smokehart didn't seem annoyed or surprised by the crowd's reaction; in fact, he looked like he was enjoying it.

‘What did *we* ever do to any of them?’ Seb asked, grimacing as another dummy hit the glass. ‘It was a mistake to think anyone down here would help us. None of them even tried to prevent our arrest.’

Ivy flinched as she heard another burp. She didn’t think what Seb said was entirely fair – Ethel had made an attempt.

He bent his head. ‘It sucks being related to a member of the Dirge. It’s not like we can do anything to change it.’

Ivy nodded. ‘I know.’ She felt like they had to go around proving that they were nothing like Octavius Wrench, just so people wouldn’t hate them. She’d never had to deal with anything like that before. Up to this point in her life, everyone had judged her on who she was, not who she was related to.

She rocked sideways as the coach set off. They were moving at a brisk trot, the hoofbeats as steady as a sewing machine. The crowd chased them for a while but Ivy was too involved in her own thoughts to notice them. In ten minutes or so she and Seb would be in the underguard station. Her spirits plunged as she saw herself locked up in one of those cells. There would be no chance to save her mum and dad then.

As they drove through the streets, Ivy’s mind kept wandering back to the series of events that had led to this moment. There had been three dead attacks in succession now – first the grim-wolf, then the selkie, then the wraithmoth. She remembered the newspaper article’s reference to the *dead uprising*. The Dirge must be getting impatient. She wondered what they were planning to do with the Great Uncommon Good object once they got hold of it.

‘Mum and Dad have only got till midnight tonight,’ she said, her voice cracking.

‘As if I need reminding!’ Seb glanced over at the man in the corner and whispered, ‘Do you think we can talk in front of him?’

Ivy shrugged. She saw that the man was staring blankly out of the window. ‘We need to escape,’ she said in a hushed voice. ‘Leave Lundinor and go back to Bletchy Scrubb. We have to find this Great Uncommon Good object before the Dirge do. Maybe if we tell Granma, she’ll have remembered something . . .’

Seb clenched his paperclipped hands. ‘Good plan – but how do we get out of these? I’ve still got my drumsticks up my sleeve – but if I use them, I think Smokehart will hear.’

Scratch might have some ideas, Ivy thought, but before she could speak, the quiet man opposite started gesturing to his mouth with his paperclipped hands and then shaking his head.

‘Uh . . .’ Seb frowned in puzzlement.

Ivy tried to work out what the man was telling them. ‘You . . . can’t speak?’ she guessed.

The stranger nodded. Ivy shuffled closer as he turned round to show her the back pocket of his jeans. Sticking out of it she saw a grey eraser – the kind she had in her pencil case at school. He tried to stretch for it with his paperclipped hands but he couldn’t reach.

Ivy could. As soon as she pulled the eraser out of his pocket, she could feel that it was uncommon. ‘What does it do?’ she asked.

The man held up his wrists. Ivy glanced at the silver paperclip thread binding them.

She turned to Seb. ‘Hold your hands up; I’m gonna try something.’

She rubbed the eraser over the thread of silver metal wrapped around his hands. The metal flaked away in seconds, leaving behind a little pile of silver filings. He pulled his hands apart. ‘Give it here – I’ll do yours.’

Once Ivy’s paperclip was off, she rubbed out the stranger’s restraints. He beamed at her before checking through the glass at the top of the coach. Smokehart and the driver were facing forward, unaware of what was going on.

The man signalled to a point in the middle of the floor. Ivy and Seb wriggled away as he rubbed his eraser across it, turning first the carpet, then the glue and wood, into dust. When he had finished, a circular piece of the floor dropped down onto the cobbles below.

Seb raised his eyebrows. ‘Er – thanks.’

The man offered them both a farewell salute before dropping through the hole and rolling to the side of the road. Ivy stared nervously down at the cobbles as the coach moved away from him. ‘You go first,’ she told Seb.

He slid his legs through and fell onto the road with a thud. Ivy saw him getting to his feet and waving back at her.

She took one last look at Smokehart, considering how fortunate she and Seb had been to find a stranger who could help them escape. Maybe it was a bit *too* convenient . . . or maybe their luck was finally beginning to change.

Dropping through the hole, she stayed low as the coach passed overhead. When it was clear, she got to her feet, ignoring a twinge in her ankle, and dashed over to join Seb. He was standing on the corner of a road packed with little haberdashery stalls.

‘Seb – you all right?’

He nodded. ‘You’re limping. Everything OK?’

Ivy rubbed her ankle. ‘It’s nothing. Let’s get out of here.’ She looked around, trying to get her bearings. ‘Do you know where we are?’

Seb gazed along the street. All the shops appeared to sell one thing: fabric. It was displayed draped over mannequins in the windows and huge rolls were stacked on the pavements outside. Sheets of satin and bolts of silk were being inspected by curious passers-by, while hand-stitched bunting waved enthusiastically from the gables above. Ivy couldn’t tell what their uncommon ability was – until she spotted a tapestry displayed in one of the windows. It depicted a storm at sea, with ships riding the waves and the sky full of clouds. As she watched, the tapestry appeared to ripple, the sky swirled and one of the great galleons crashed through the water, as if the picture had come alive.

She shook her head, trying to refocus. ‘We need to move,’ she said, forcing her eyes away. ‘Smokehart will realize we’re missing soon.’

Seb took a step forward but then rocked back on his heels. ‘Wait a sec. Ivy, can you see . . . ?’ His eyes widened as he stared down the street.

Ivy followed his gaze . . . Through the rippling lengths of cloth she caught glimpses of a man with neatly combed salt-and-pepper hair standing on the pavement. He was wearing a button-down shirt and brown flannel trousers.

Ivy frowned. ‘Dad?’

Chapter Twenty-eight

‘What is Dad *doing* here?’ Ivy rubbed her eyes, making sure she wasn’t seeing things. He was meant to be the Dirge’s hostage but he didn’t look like he’d been kidnapped at all – his shirt was pressed and his face was clean.

Seb reached for her arm. His hand was shaking. ‘Is that really him?’

Their dad disappeared behind a hanging bedsheet. Ivy tensed. ‘He’s moving away,’ she cried. ‘We mustn’t lose him.’

They ran past roll after roll of fabric. The air was thick with loose threads and dusty particles that caught at the back of Ivy’s throat, making her cough.

‘He’s turning left!’ Seb called.

Ivy nodded. She tried to work out if there was anything different about her dad, but she was too far away to tell. Judging by his moderate pace, he wasn’t in any trouble.

She didn’t understand . . .

They turned down a deserted street, where their dad came to a halt between two large stone buildings. As Ivy and Seb approached, they heard a rumble. The cobbles beneath Ivy’s feet shook, as if the underguard’s horses were about to come pounding down the road.

But it wasn’t the underguard making the noise.

‘Ivy,’ Seb whispered, pointing. ‘The fountain!’

They hid in a shop doorway on the opposite side of the street. A chill crept over Ivy as she watched.

Sure enough, the pale-green fountain that she and Seb had found yesterday had appeared in front of their dad. He got a hip flask out of his trouser pocket and poured something into the leaf-filled basin. Next he placed his hand deep inside it, waited a moment and then stepped back. The bricks surrounding the fountain trembled as two iron posts and a gate formed between them.

‘Maybe we should go after him,’ Ivy said, ‘before he disappears.’

Seb frowned. ‘I don’t understand why he’s here, let alone why he’s going in—’ He gave a start. ‘What if the grim-wolf’s still at the mansion?’

Ivy gasped. ‘We need to warn him!’

They dashed straight across the street—

And into the path of someone else.

‘*Valian?*’ Ivy stepped back, aghast. Her face flushed with anger, remembering his most recent disappearance. ‘We were arrested!’ she hissed. ‘You left us!’

Valian was holding his arms out wide, trying to stop them. ‘Don’t go after it,’ he told them, ignoring Ivy’s remarks. ‘Don’t go into the mansion after that thing – it’s dangerous.’

‘After that *thing*?’ Seb stretched up on tiptoe, trying to get a view of the fountain. ‘That isn’t a *thing*! That’s our *dad*!’

Valian looked frantic. ‘No it’s not. It’s one of the races of the dead.’

Ivy gritted her teeth as she tried to push him aside – she could see her dad disappearing through the gate!

‘Please,’ Valian said gently. ‘You’ve got to trust me.’

‘Trust *you*?’ Ivy hesitated. The man they had followed looked *exactly* like her dad. She checked Seb. He looked just as torn as she was. ‘If you want us to trust you, then you have to tell us the truth. About everything.’

‘The truth.’ Valian’s voice was soft. He ran a hand through his long hair. ‘OK, fine. If it’s the only way you’re gonna trust me, then I guess I have to.’

A sinking feeling swept through Ivy. Whatever the truth was, she had a hunch she wasn’t going to like it.

‘Go on then,’ Seb said, folding his arms. ‘We’re waiting.’

Valian’s face was grave. ‘Not here. It’s too dangerous.’

He led the way to a small shop with cracked green window frames and dirty glass. The sign above the door read: HOFF & WINKLE’S HOBSMATCH EMPORIUM, EST. 1847. Behind the shop was a rickety timber staircase.

As they started to ascend, Seb mumbled into Ivy’s ear, ‘What’s he up to? Was that Dad back there or not?’

Ivy didn’t know what to think. She was still confused by the shock of seeing her dad apparently alive and well. ‘Valian,’ she said harshly. ‘If that wasn’t our dad, who was it?’

‘I told you,’ he replied. ‘A race of the dead. They’re called grimps. They have the ability to shapeshift; that’s why it looked like your dad.’

Ivy thought back to *Farrow’s Guide* . . . She didn’t remember Scratch reading about grimps in there. ‘How do you know it was a grimp?’

Valian stopped in front of a plain black door at the top of the stairs. ‘Because that’s not the first time I’ve seen it. I met it when I was in the Wrench Mansion with you.’

Ivy’s mouth dropped open. So *that’s* what he’d been up to. ‘Why didn’t you tell us?’

‘There’s a lot I haven’t told you. There’s a lot I haven’t told anyone.’ He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. ‘We’ll talk inside.’

Behind the black door was a small room with threadbare curtains. A metal-framed bed sat in the corner beside a chest of drawers and a wash basin with a rusted mirror. Ivy noticed scum around the taps and crumbs on the bare floorboards. The walls were covered with posters of various rock bands, none of which she had heard of.

‘You’d better sit down,’ Valian told them.

‘Make yourself at home,’ Seb whispered into Ivy’s ear as he perched on the end of the bed.

Ivy sat down slowly. Was this Valian’s room? She felt uncomfortable being in there. Valian stood by the wash basin, looking at them.

‘So . . . the grimp?’ Seb brushed a dead fly off the bedspread.

‘It was at the Wrench Mansion,’ Valian repeated. ‘It took a little investigation back at your gran’s house before I realized that it looked exactly like your dad. After that, I started following it.’

‘Wait – you went to Granma’s house behind our back?’ Ivy exclaimed.

Valian sighed. ‘You’d understand why if you knew the whole story.’ He turned and looked into the rusty mirror. ‘When I found that crooked sixpence in your pocket, Ivy, I assumed you were working for the Dirge. Ethel’s deal for me to be your bodyguard was the perfect excuse to stay close and find out what you were really up to. All those times I disappeared, I was off investigating on my own. Just now, in the Cabbage Moon, I went to check out your room for evidence of the wraithmoth; I managed to retrieve those for you . . .’ He pointed to the windowsill behind the bed.

Ivy started. Granma Sylvie’s handbag was there, along with the uncommon alarm clock. She reached across and gathered them up, thankful they were safe. ‘If you thought we were working for the Dirge, then why help now?’ she asked.

‘I know you’re not working for the Dirge. After the alarm clock and the selkie attack I realized you’d been telling the truth the whole time.’ He looked down and mumbled, ‘I’m . . . sorry.’

Ivy shared an incredulous glance with Seb.

Valian looked up at them again. ‘My name *is* Valian Kaye and I *am* a scout; that’s all true.’ He pointed to three framed photographs standing on the chest of drawers: two of a small girl with blonde hair, the third of a happy young couple. ‘That’s my family: my parents, and my little sister, Rosie.’

Ivy wondered why he was mentioning them now. ‘Are they uncommoners too?’

‘They *were*,’ Valian corrected her. ‘My parents were both scouts, like me, but . . . they’re dead now.’

There was a long pause while they looked awkwardly at the floor.

Finally Ivy asked, ‘What happened?’

Valian clenched his fists in their fingerless gloves. ‘They were murdered by the Dirge. I’ve always thought the Dirge member using *Hemlock* as a code name was responsible because that was the poison found on their lips.’

Ivy gasped in horror. ‘How old were you?’ she asked gently.

‘Nine,’ Valian told her, sighing. ‘That’s why the underguard didn’t believe me about the crooked sixpences.’

‘Didn’t believe you?’ Seb’s voice cracked. ‘Why not?’

Valian looked at him. ‘I found a crooked sixpence in each of my parent’s glasses; that’s how I know the Dirge murdered them. But the coins had disappeared by the time the underguard turned up to investigate. To this day they still think my parents died of accidental poisoning.’

Seb puffed out a sigh. ‘That’s . . . awful.’

Ivy’s attention moved to the photos of the little blonde girl. ‘Where’s your sister now?’

Valian pushed himself away from the sink and slumped down on the floor. ‘Good question,’ he muttered. ‘After our parents were killed, Rosie and I had to leave Lundinor. Social services in the common world found us a place with foster parents. We came back to say our goodbyes one last time. There was a huge crowd in the Gauntlet and I got separated from

Rosie. I saw her heading off into the Dead End. She was only six; I guess she thought she might find our parents amongst the dead traders.' He sighed. 'She never came back. The underguard stopped searching for her after a week or so, but I never gave up. I never *will* give up. Half of everything I scout for now is something to help me find her. That bell I took from Ethel . . . I had a hunch it might locate Rosie, but it didn't work. It's been six years since she went missing; I still don't know what happened.'

Ivy swallowed as Valian finished. What must it feel like to lose your whole family? No wonder he acted like an outsider half the time. 'I'm so sorry,' she said weakly. She didn't know what else to say. She felt cold with regret at the things she'd thought about him.

'You must hate us,' Seb muttered, 'because of who we're related to.'

Something flickered in Valian's eyes. 'I did at first. I told you: I thought you were working for the Dirge. But I gradually realized it couldn't be true. If I'd been given the chance to save my mum and dad, I'd have acted exactly like you.'

'Why does the grimp look like our dad?' Seb asked.

Valian's face darkened. 'Grimps take the form of their host. There's a GUT law that forbids any grimp from taking an unwilling host, but like I told you earlier – the dead break the rules all the time.'

'So . . . the grimp is working for the Dirge and our dad is being used as this grimp's host?' Ivy summarized, connecting the dots. She couldn't bear to think of it. 'What does that mean?'

Valian shifted position on the floor. 'If the host is legal, then it donates hair or toenails for the grimp to feed off. Then, after a few hours, the grimp starts to resemble its host. If the host is taken illegally . . . Well, the grimp doesn't get donations. It just takes what it needs.'

Ivy was horrified. 'Are you saying that Dad is being . . . eaten?' Valian's eyes told her all she needed to know. 'Seb – *no*. We've got to do something!'

'How do we stop it?' Seb's eyes glimmered with purpose as he got to his feet.

Valian held up a hand. 'For the moment we don't. We follow it back into the Wrench Mansion. But we do it carefully. It keeps returning for something. I'd bet everything I own that your mum and dad are being held there.'

Ivy felt hot anger burning through her veins. She was more determined than ever to get them back.

‘I know I’ve lied to you,’ Valian said, ‘and you’ve got no reason to trust me, but what you’re feeling right now . . . that’s exactly the way I feel about my sister. You’ve only got till midnight before that alarm clock rings. Let me help you. We can save them together.’

Ivy had already made up her mind, but Seb, she thought, might be more difficult to convince. ‘What do you think?’ she asked, looking up at her brother.

Seb was staring at the photo of Rosie. He rubbed his eyes quickly, hoping no one would notice the welling tears. ‘I think we could do with a hand . . .’ His gaze fell on the posters adorning Valian’s walls and he frowned. ‘Even if it does come from someone without a single Ripz poster in their life.’

Chapter Twenty-nine

Valian felt around in his inside pocket. 'You both remember the plan?'

Ivy nodded as she leaned forward and splashed a cupful of water into the basin of the uncommon fountain. She wiggled her fingers around under the surface and immediately felt the ground groan and tremble. As the two black gateposts emerged on either side, she wondered how the fountain worked. It had activated when Seb had put his hand in yesterday, and now with Ivy, but it had also worked for the grimp. Maybe, she guessed, it was able to read their fingerprints under the water. The grimp must have taken their dad as a host so it could use his fingerprints to gain access to the mansion.

'Remember, your parents will be behind the Ragwort or Wolfsbane doors,' Valian said.

Seb gave a nod. 'Got it.'

Ivy placed a hand in the centre of the gates. 'And if something goes wrong, we get out any way we can and meet back at your place above Hoff and Winkle's Hobsmatch Emporium, Valian.' Her hand was trembling. The plan wasn't foolproof, but it was all they had. Maybe that was why she and Seb had left anything of value back in Valian's room. All Ivy had on her now was the uncommon yo-yo, and what remained of her dwindling confidence.

'OK.' Valian patted down his jacket pockets and gave a satisfied nod. 'Let's do this.'

Ivy didn't think it was possible for the Wrench Mansion to be any more creepy the second time round, but she was wrong. As they trudged up the hill towards the front door, dry leaves skittered across their path like rats and the wind whistled eerily. The dark sky swirled with a coming storm and the old house creaked and groaned as if warning them away.

Inside, the entrance hall was pitch black. Ivy sniffed the air. The smell of wet dog still lingered, but there was something else, something much worse. ‘Ugh.’ It smelled like toilets and gone-off Brussels sprouts. ‘Seb, you didn’t just—’

Even though he could barely see her, Seb still managed to hit her on the arm. ‘No, I didn’t! Even mine aren’t this bad.’

Ivy heard Valian shuffling up beside her. ‘I know that smell. There’s only one type of creature that foul: a Victorian sewer selkie. It must have been here recently. Be on your guard.’

Ivy shivered as she recalled the selkie that had attacked her – those empty black eyes and rows of razor-sharp teeth. She covered her nose and tried to pretend the smell wasn’t there. ‘There were lemon squeezers on the walls before,’ she said.

Valian sighed and unzipped something, casting a silvery-blue light into the darkness. His face was eerily lit from below. ‘It’s from Johnny Hands . . .’ He nodded down at the glowing object. ‘Don’t ask me what it does exactly. I only know that it glows sometimes.’

Ivy examined it more closely. It looked like a miniature spade with a curved steel blade and polished wooden handle. Only the metal part was glowing. ‘*That* was what he gave you?’ she asked, recognizing the tool with a frown. ‘A garden trowel?’

He scowled. ‘Yeah. Compensation for giving you my yo-yo, apparently.’

Ivy smiled awkwardly.

Valian pointed across the hallway with the uncommon trowel. ‘Let’s just find the envelope.’

They found it at the foot of the stairs. Ivy picked it up. ‘Ready?’ she asked. Seb grasped her shoulder and nodded; Valian laid a gloved hand on her elbow.

Ivy opened the envelope, and suddenly the world was rotating around her. The silvery light from Valian’s trowel flashed through the air, round and round and round . . .

When it stopped spinning, they were in total darkness. Valian took his hand away and stepped back, waving the trowel around. Its ghostly light revealed the brick walls of a long tunnel.

Ivy shivered. ‘This isn’t Octavius’ study,’ she pointed out. ‘There should be bookcases and furniture.’ *And it should smell musty and old,* she thought nervously. *This place still smells of selkie slime* . . .

Seb and Valian reached for Ivy’s shoulders. She closed the envelope and then opened it up again.

Nothing happened.

'Try it again,' Valian said. She could hear the worry in his voice.

She opened the flap on the back once more, in exactly the same way. Her fingers were still tingling with warmth. 'It's definitely the same envelope. It feels uncommon. I don't get what's wrong.'

'It *feels* uncommon?' Valian raised an eyebrow.

Ivy gave a shy smile. She might as well tell him now. 'I'm a whisperer,' she said in a hushed voice.

Valian's eyes grew wide. 'You're a *what*?'

Ivy looked down, hiding her face behind her hair. It felt weird having a secret that made people see her as special. Anyway, she still didn't know how to use her gifts properly. 'Don't get excited,' she told him. 'I don't see how it's going to help us.'

'Look, we're still here,' Seb said, holding one of his drumsticks aloft. 'What's wrong with the envelope?'

Valian stared at Ivy as if he wanted to say something else, but then he pointed at the envelope. 'Give it here.' He sighed when he turned it over. Ivy looked down and read the ink stamp in the top right corner. It didn't say direct mail any more, it said: redirected mail.

'*Great*. Someone's tampered with it. It must be some sort of trap.' Valian looked down the dark tunnel. 'This is our only way out now.' He screwed the envelope into a ball and threw it on the floor. Ivy shivered as she stuffed her hand back into her pocket and clasped her yo-yo.

They proceeded slowly, with Valian in front, holding out the trowel. The tunnel was around a hundred metres long, filled with cobwebs and scuttling shadows. At the very end, a small arch-shaped opening led into darkness.

As Ivy put one foot in front of the other, her dream from the previous night invaded her mind – the black hands of the uncommon alarm clock slicing away fractions of time; her mum's face disintegrating into maggots; her dad being eaten by a faceless monster.

Valian's trowel glowed brighter.

'Isn't there a dimmer switch on that thing?' Seb asked, shielding his eyes.

Valian lowered it. 'I don't think it's glowing because it's dark,' he said, peering around cautiously. 'It must be sensing something. That's why it's growing stronger.'

Ivy coughed as they made their way under the arch. The smell was getting worse, she was sure of it. It was as if the contents of every Portaloo in London had been dumped there.

Once they were through, Valian's trowel started to blaze brightly. The tunnel walls on either side of them disappeared, and in the emptiness beyond Ivy spotted a small wooden desk covered with an inch of dust. On it sat an equally dusty old typewriter and a stack of yellowed, moth-eaten papers.

'Where are we?' Seb was holding his drumsticks close to his chest. His voice echoed off whatever lay in the darkness beyond.

'This place sounds massive,' Valian said. 'Look for a light switch; the trowel won't reach far enough.'

Ivy saw that the walls were covered in moss. She felt the slimy, damp surface, searching for any change in texture.

'Over here!' Seb called, after a minute or so. 'There's some sort of handle.'

Ivy turned to see a large stainless steel lever fixed to the wall. Seb forced it down.

For a second nothing happened. Then a broken buzzing noise started above their heads; it sounded like a dying wasp. A grid of electric ceiling lights struggled into brightness and continued flickering, so that it looked as if everything below was being played in jerky slow motion.

Ivy blinked. She caught glimpses of a giant hall, as large as the main arrivals chamber in Lundinor. The ceiling was vaulted like a cathedral's, the same grey concrete as the walls and floor. Behind the small desk to Ivy's right were a dozen narrow banqueting tables that ran the entire length of the hall. Each one was topped by a long conveyor belt – the kind used in supermarket checkouts – and bordered by a row of wooden chairs. Scattered on top of the conveyor belts was a mixture of what looked like rubbish: ripped bin liners exploding with odds and ends – tissue, fabric, glass jars, brass door handles, broken china and other random household items.

Ivy searched for any sign of life, but the place appeared to be deserted. Cobwebs hung between the chairs and carpeted the conveyor belts like crocheted blankets, and dust hovered in the air. It was one of the eeriest sights Ivy had ever seen – like a ghostly recycling plant.

‘What *is* this place?’ Seb asked, stepping forward. ‘It’s like a creepy movie set.’

Ivy approached the nearest table and examined one of the chairs. There was a small iron manacle chained to the concrete floor beneath it. ‘It looks like people were tied up here.’ She sat down and laid her hands on the table. The chair was the perfect height for her.

Valian waved the glowing trowel in front of him. Ivy saw a look of horror in his eyes. ‘I think I know what this might be,’ he said. ‘I’ve heard rumours . . . It’s called a “whispering hall”.’ He looked at Ivy. ‘They’re used to harness the power of whisperers. It was barbaric. Whisperers were made to sort through rubbish all day long till they found something uncommon.’ He picked up a tin can from one of the piles of junk. ‘But they only existed in ancient times. This one looks as if it was built within the last fifty years.’

Ivy jumped to her feet and scrambled away from the table. ‘Look at everything,’ she said, suddenly understanding what this place was. ‘It’s all designed to fit someone my size. It’s designed for—’

‘Children,’ Seb finished, horror glazing his eyes. ‘It must have something to do with the Dirge.’

Ivy gazed around at the hundreds of chairs and pictured all the whisperers who had been imprisoned there – kids just like her – forced to move their gloveless hands through God knows what for hours and hours on end.

Valian crunched the tin can in his fist. ‘I bet *this* was where all those kidnapped children came,’ he spat angrily. ‘They must have all been whisperers.’

Ivy remembered what Scratch had told her: whispering had been thought impossible for a child. That was probably why no one in Lundinor had figured out why the children were being taken – no one guessed they were whisperers. Only the Dirge had discovered it.

‘Scratch told me that my whispering was unusually sensitive,’ she said to Valian. ‘Do you think that’s why the Dirge hunted young whisperers – because their abilities were stronger than adults?’ She thought about all those terrified children, stolen from their families and forced to work in an underground prison.

Suddenly Valian started. ‘Can you hear that?’

Ivy strained her ears. There was a weird noise in the air, a kind of fluttering.

Valian's eyes widened as his trowel burned with white light. 'I think I've just realized what uncommon trowels do.' He lifted it high above his head and directed the umbrella of light between two of the long tables. It lit up a series of bulky, dim shapes approaching from the edge of the hall. 'They sense the presence of the dead.'

Ivy's eyes darted around. Figures began appearing out of the shadows, some hulking and cumbersome, others wispy and fast. Slowly she lifted her yo-yo out in front of her, trying to keep her arm steady.

Seb pointed a drumstick into the distance. 'What's in here? Selkies?'

'Others too,' Valian whispered fearfully.

They all fell silent as a thin stream of black dust snaked over the floor towards them. In places, the powdery stuff flaked away like dead skin and sprouted spiky hairs. 'What is it?' Ivy asked, coughing.

'Wraithmoth,' Valian wheezed. 'The closer it gets, the harder you'll find it to breathe.' He unzipped his jacket and rummaged around inside. 'Don't touch them. They're deadly.' He edged closer, tugging his uncommon bath plug out of his pocket and swinging it above his head like a lasso.

Seb was gasping. '*They?*'

Ivy made a panicked search into the distance. A second wraithmoth had appeared above a conveyor belt, writhing around and sending smoky tendrils into the air like an angry spider. More dark figures were just behind it, drawing closer.

She tried to think. Surely there was another way out of this place. She glanced up at the lights on the ceiling. They didn't look uncommon – there were wires running to the other end of the hall. Ivy traced them through the shadows, down a pillar and along a wall. They ended in a steel box next to a handle identical to the one Seb had pulled. Beside it she could just make out a dark rectangle – a door.

Ivy grabbed Seb and pointed. 'Do you see that?'

He nodded.

Valian was still whirling the uncommon bath plug above his head. 'What are you waiting for?!' he rasped. 'Run!'

Run. Ivy's legs jerked into action, but Seb soon overtook her. 'Ivy, quickly!' he shouted.

She followed him between two long tables but her wellies were slipping all over the place. Her arms flailed wildly as she struggled to keep her balance. ‘Selkie slime!’ she screamed. The floor was covered with it. She spied the second wraithmoth coming towards them.

Seb had seen it too. ‘What do we do?’

The wraithmoth was blocking their path to the door, but if they turned back, they’d only meet Valian and the other creature.

With a shaking hand, Seb sliced his drumsticks once, twice through the air. A millisecond later twin shock-waves sent the creature tumbling backwards. It gave a furious hiss as fingers of black smoke wove together to repair the holes in its body.

Ivy saw the confidence drain from Seb’s face. She was about to have a go with her yo-yo when she noticed a shadow creeping across the floor. The wraithmoth was shifting. With the sound of wind filling a sail, it unfolded two smoky wings over the long table on either side.

Cursing, Seb steadied himself and shouted at Ivy without taking his eyes off the monster, ‘Ivy, get to the door!’

As the wraithmoth swooped towards them, he began desperately thrashing out a beat with his drumsticks, and the wraithmoth screeched.

Ivy ducked as Seb’s drumsticks sent shockwaves through the air. Riddled with holes, the wraithmoth kept rebuilding itself with ribbons of smoke. Seb concentrated on the beat, the muscles in his shoulders rippling, his eyes focused. Every sound wave he sent out acted like a bar in an invisible cage. The wraithmoth was soon trapped – but Ivy wasn’t sure how long Seb would be able to keep it up.

‘Just go, will you?’ he yelled, through gritted teeth. ‘Please, Ivy. It’s the only way.’

Tears blurred Ivy’s vision as she slid under the trapped wraithmoth and between the long tables. Just then, she saw a familiar sandy-haired dog trotting out from beneath one of the tables.

Selena Grimes’s dog? Ivy came to a stop.

The dog yapped and then yawned and stretched its legs – but all at once its limbs elongated, and gnarled black claws burst from its paws. Its back rose up and its sandy brown hair darkened to the colour of soot. The yap deepened, and sharp black teeth emerged from its gums. It looked at Ivy with a pair of demon-red eyes, lips curling into a wicked smile.

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ the grim-wolf announced, stalking towards her. ‘My disguise is *so* much better than a grandma.’

Ivy’s eyes widened. So *Selena Grimes* was Wolfsbane, the grim-wolf’s mistress!

She stumbled backwards. Somewhere in the whispering hall behind her, heavy objects clattered against a conveyor belt; chairs crashed to the floor and the sound of rushing water thundered around the walls. *Selkies*. Ivy’s eyes watered with their stench. But . . . she couldn’t turn round to check if Valian and Seb were OK.

Squaring her shoulders, she raised her yo-yo and, through blurry eyes, tried to take aim at the grim-wolf. Flicking her wrist, she sent the yo-yo shooting down to the end of the string. As it worked its way back up towards her hand, a white cylinder of air formed on either side and broke away, heading for the grim-wolf, picking up water and selkie slime as they went.

The grim-wolf watched the cyclones approach with a smirk on its face, rearing up onto its back legs and leaping onto one of the long tables. The very edge of one cyclone caught the tip of the grim-wolf’s tail, but it quickly pulled itself free and dropped back onto the floor. As it shook itself dry, Ivy’s cyclones crashed into the wall behind, steaming.

‘Really?’ the wolf mocked. ‘What are you going to do – huff and puff and blow me down?’

Ivy glowered at it. This was definitely the same grim-wolf that had attacked them in the Wrench Mansion – it had the same obsession with nursery rhymes. She focused on the door beyond the wolf. If she could just slip past it somehow . . .

The wolf licked its lips, staring at Ivy with its demonic red eyes.

Ivy fumbled with her yo-yo again. If only she knew how to use it properly. Those last cyclones had been useless; she needed to generate something that the grim-wolf couldn’t dodge.

Suddenly she heard the scream of a selkie. Her ears burned like they’d been set on fire. She groaned and drove her hands to each side of her head, trying to block out the noise.

The grim-wolf howled and flattened its ears, lowering its head under its front paw.

Ivy blinked. *The wolf can hear the selkie too*. She had to use this to her advantage.

She threw her yo-yo down and dragged it back up as fast and as hard as she could. The air around her began to tremble and spin. It would be dangerous to generate such large cyclones in a confined space, but it was her only option.

Ivy unhooked her finger and hurled the yo-yo into the air just as the grim-wolf leaped towards her. She was thrown backwards as the double vortex shot up, expanding and rotating, on a collision course with the grim-wolf.

Ivy's hair was whipped into her eyes as something hit her in the chest, knocking her backwards. She fell into a heap of rubbish, sharp objects poking her sides and wet slime seeping into her trousers. *Get up, Ivy. Get up.* The huge whirlwind had sucked in the chairs on either side, along with piles of rubbish. The grim-wolf was running on the spot at the edge of the cyclones, as if stuck on a treadmill.

Ivy looked around dazedly and saw the broken remains of a large ceramic lamp next to her – that was what had knocked her over. As she staggered to her feet, her fingers brushed something that sent a warm tingle into her skin. She turned and searched carefully till she came across the uncommon object – a leather belt with a rusty buckle.

Without stopping to think, she quickly fastened it and then lifted it above her head. Her mind racing ahead of her, she drove herself up through the air – over the whirlwinds, over the struggling grim-wolf. Landing safely on the other side, she lowered the belt to her waist and touched down.

The door in the back wall was ajar. Battling against the pull of the maelstrom, she headed towards it and yanked it open. Her skin immediately burned with heat – the door was uncommon – but she couldn't stop: she stepped over the threshold into a small silver room bathed in green light. Directly in front of her she saw a face – a face she recognized.

'*Dad?*'

The creature that looked like Dad grinned. Its skin was see-through and its neck sagged like melted wax. 'Hello, brat.' It pointed an uncommon toilet brush at Ivy's head. 'I know you think you're smart, but if you even move a muscle' – the creature's eyes glinted – 'I'll have you.'

Chapter Thirty

Ivy stood there quaking; fear and anger bubbled inside her. She locked eyes with her dad.

Except it's not really him . . .

Her dad never looked at her like that – with an evil, malice-filled stare. Valian had explained what the creature really was: *a shapeshifter; a grimp*.

The grimp's blue eyes glittered, reflecting the flashing lights in the whispering hall behind. Ivy could still hear the ongoing battle – the clatter of rubbish and the surge of water. The grimp grumbled and, keeping its eyes and the toilet brush fixed on Ivy, edged its way round towards the uncommon door. Ivy realized that she had seen the door before – in the Hexroom. It was the same stainless steel door that the grim-wolf had emerged from; the one belonging to Wolfsbane.

'Goblin!?' the grimp shouted. A drop of saliva fell from its lips. 'Get out of there. Those selkies are back!'

Ivy heard a growl and then saw the grim-wolf stealing towards the door. Its fur was matted, but it had obviously escaped the yo-yo tornados. It smiled as its red eyes fixed on Ivy. Once it was over the threshold, the grimp slammed the door shut with an echoing thud.

Everything around Ivy fell eerily silent, with only the memory of the selkie's scream ringing in her ears. She swallowed: if she couldn't hear Seb and Valian any more, they certainly couldn't hear her.

'Now, isn't that better?' the grimp asked, grinning as it made its way round to face her. Its voice was harsh and grating, like fingernails down a blackboard. 'Finally we can hear each other clearly.'

And see each other clearly . . .

The grimp was wearing the long grey coat and button-down shirt that Ivy's dad had been wearing when she'd waved goodbye to him three days ago. She glared at the poor imitation. Close up, it looked like a bad waxwork. The grimp had the same speckly grey hair, the blue eyes, the line of freckles on the brow, and the thin nose and flat chin. But there was something wrong with its expression.

Ivy suddenly wondered if the illusion was crumbling because it hadn't fed for a while.

'Now,' the grimp said, rubbing its hands together. Its arms hung loosely in front of it like a chimpanzee's – in marked contrast to Ivy's dad, who always stood up straight. 'Where is the object, Ivy Sparrow?' it hissed, darting its head forward. 'Where is the Great Uncommon Good?'

Ivy wished she still had her yo-yo. She'd have liked to throw it straight at the grimp's head. 'What have you done with my mum and dad?!' she shouted.

The grim-wolf – *Goblin* – sniggered. 'Uh-uh,' it tutted, shaking its furry head. 'That wasn't the correct answer.' It paced back and forth, its tail whipping through the air. 'Tell us where your grandmother hid the object. No one wants this to get messier than it needs to.'

The grimp sniggered. 'Speak for yourself, Goblin.'

Ivy grasped the leather belt and tried to inch backwards. She cast her eyes around, searching for a weapon. The room was cylindrical, with metal walls, like a huge tin can; there was only one obvious way in and out – the uncommon door through which Ivy had entered. Around the edge she saw a ring of electronic consoles with dusty switches, smashed bulbs and dark glass monitors, while in the centre stood a shaft of green light locked within a rotating metal cage. It made a strange humming noise as it spun.

'If you let us know where the object is,' Goblin purred, baring sharp teeth, 'then this can all be over.'

'I don't know!' Ivy shouted. 'I don't even know what it *is*!'

The grim-wolf tossed its head back and laughed. The grimp took a lumbering step towards Ivy and thrust the toilet brush in her face. Blue sparks leaped into the air. Their power thrummed against her cheeks.

'Listen carefully, little girl: our mistress is a very clever woman, but not renowned for her patience. She knows the object is somewhere in the basement of the Wrench Mansion – else why would Ragwort have been down here looking for it? Have you told *him* where it is?'

Ragwort . . . Ivy shook her head, trying to decipher what the grimp meant. If their mistress, Wolfsbane, wasn't sure what Ragwort knew . . . then she couldn't have been working with him; she must be working *against* him.

Wolfsbane and Ragwort, each trying to claim one of the Great Uncommon Good for themselves. *That* was why they'd given her and Seb a deadline. It had turned into a race between them. Ivy paired her enemies up. If Goblin and the grimp were working for Selena Grimes, then the selkies, wraithmoths and others must be employed by Ragwort, or the man in grey – whoever that was.

Goblin's red eyes glowed. 'Why not tell us where the object is, Ivy? You're going to die anyway.'

'And so are your parents,' the grimp added, still grinning.

Ivy staggered backwards in shock. She wasn't going to let them kill her parents. 'Where are they?!' she yelled, but her throat was raw and it came out as a croak.

The grimp waved the toilet brush back and forth. 'It's too late for them, little girl.'

'What have you done with them?' Ivy felt tears welling and brushed them away firmly.

'Nothing . . . yet,' it said. 'I was under specific instructions to keep them alive and in one piece until midnight tonight.' It sniggered – a kind of hissing snort. 'But that was *then*. This is *now*.' It advanced towards her, lunging with the toilet brush. Ivy looked around again, but there was nowhere left to go.

She saw that the grimp's eyes were now black, like two holes in a skull. 'I'll give you one more chance to tell us where it is. And then it's goodbye.'

Ivy shook her head furiously. 'I don't *know*!' she repeated.

The grimp shrugged. 'Oh well. I'll try asking your brother. Maybe he can be . . . persuaded with other methods.'

Goblin growled, teeth bared.

Burning rage spread through Ivy. 'You leave my brother alone!' She leaped towards the grimp, the belt lashing out behind her like a whip.

The grimp simply disappeared like a ghost, and she went crashing headfirst into a dark computer screen.

When she clambered to her feet, the grimp was in front of her again. She could hear Goblin snorting with laughter. The grimp looked at her with a cruel, amused expression. 'Maybe I won't kill you just yet; maybe I'll just toss you in the ghoul hole; then I can take my time later.'

Ghoul hole . . . The name tugged at the edges of Ivy's memory.

The grimp licked its lips. ‘Don’t worry. You’ll have company.’ It thrust the toilet brush towards Ivy’s heart.

Ivy groaned as the brush made impact, her body shaking violently. Pain ripped through her chest. She was aware of the grimp dragging her somewhere: she heard the creak of metal bars and saw a flash of green light as she was pushed over. Then she was falling. There was a loud crack before a wave of cold spread through her body and everything stopped.

Chapter Thirty-one

Acid-green light pierced Ivy's eyes as she tried to lift her head. The first thing she felt was pain . . . *everywhere*. Her head was sore, her ribs felt bruised and her eyes stung.

The floor felt smooth and icy, like metal. Using both hands, she pushed herself up against the curved wall behind her, forcing her eyes open. She appeared to be at the bottom of a cylindrical steel shaft around two metres in diameter. Above, she could see only darkness. On the floor beside her lay the uncommon belt and two crumpled bodies. *Mum and Dad*.

As fast as she could, Ivy shuffled towards them, using the wall to support her. Her mum was lying face up with her eyes closed, strands of hair clinging to a film of sweat on her forehead. She was wearing her blue nurse's uniform and only one shoe. Ivy's dad lay curled on his side next to her. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up and his hands were bloodied and swollen. Ivy flinched as she saw that some of his fingernails were missing and his neat grey hair had been shorn off in patches. When Ivy was close enough, she reached out with a trembling hand and touched his arm. His skin was cold.

'Dad?' Her throat was dry and crackly. 'Can you hear me? It's Ivy.'

Her dad whimpered and moved his head slightly. His eyelids fluttered. 'Ivy?'

Tears poured down Ivy's cheeks. She squeezed her dad's arm, avoiding his damaged hand. 'Don't worry,' she said softly. 'I'll get you out of here.' Then, 'I love you, Dad; you're going to be OK, I promise. I love you.'

She wriggled over to her mum and pushed the hair off her face. Her mum's skin was warmer than her dad's, but there was a nasty lump on her head and she didn't open her eyes. 'Mum?' Ivy sniffed. 'Mum? It's going to be all right. We're gonna get out of here.'

Ivy quickly scanned her surroundings, looking for some fissure in the steel that she could use as a foothold.

Please, please . . .

But the walls were as smooth as liquid silver. She felt around in her jeans pocket, remembering the button Violet had given her yesterday. Her hands pulsed with heat as they brushed against it. She held the ivory disc in her palm. It wasn't going to get them out of there, but Violet had told her that the button restored health, so it might help her parents. She counted the holes in the button's centre: three. That meant it could be used at least once on each of them.

Carefully Ivy placed the button in the top pocket of her mum's tunic. To her relief, her mum stirred almost immediately. Her blue eyes fluttered open, but she seemed unable to speak. Patting her mum on the cheek, Ivy removed the button and put it in her dad's shirt pocket. She noticed her mum watching, a glazed expression on her face. Ivy's vision started to blur. She shook her head, but it only made it worse. Her mind felt cloudy, like things were slowing down. Her thoughts wandered out of control, as if she was falling asleep. Slowly – or was it quickly? – the events of the past two days seemed to drift away . . . until all she knew was the cold, dark oblivion of a hole at the end of everything . . .

'Ivy?'

Ivy. I like that name.

'Ivy? Can you hear me?'

There it is again.

'Oh, blast. Maybe this thing hasn't worked. Ivy, it's Mum. Wake up; come back to me.'

It sounds familiar . . .

'Ivy, listen to me!' the voice said sternly. It sounded clearer. 'Ivy, open your eyes!'

Ivy blinked. Everything went green. A fuzzy face hovered in front of her: large watery eyes, mousy brown hair, and a mouth that crinkled. 'Ivy? Sweetie?'

Ivy knew that the face was important; it meant something to her. She clenched her teeth against the pressure in her head. Somehow she had to remember who this was. She *had* to.

Then . . .

'Mum?'

‘Ivy!’ her mum croaked, louder. She was struggling to push herself upright. There was a pinch of colour in her cheeks, but her shoulders were trembling.

Ivy’s mind was suddenly washed with clarity, as if she’d just bobbed up onto the surface of the ocean and was heaving in fresh air, the darkness gone.

The ghoul hole . . .

The grimp had pushed her into a ghoul hole. Now she remembered why the name was familiar. She had seen a ghoul hole in the underguard station. Scratch had told her about them – they use them for muckers because they disorientate captives and make them lose their memories of their time inside, so that when they leave, it feels like no time has passed at all.

Ivy had to stop herself forgetting. She looked at her mum and then at her dad, who was stirring. She tried to picture the faces of Seb and Granma Sylvie; of all her friends at school, her favourite teachers. She reminded herself of Valian, of the selkies, the wraithmoth, and the grim-wolf. Shakily she reached for her mum’s hand and tried to help her sit up. They were both trembling and Ivy wasn’t sure she had any strength left.

‘Mum!’ She reached over and hugged her. Tears spilled out and soaked into the lapel of her mum’s tunic. She sniffed and pushed her mum back, awash with relief. ‘Mum, I need you to trust me and do what I say. Do you think you can hold this and not let go?’

She held the uncommon trouser belt out towards her mum.

The deep worry-lines on her mum’s forehead crinkled, but she did as she was told.

Ivy smiled as best she could and wriggled over to check on her dad. There was more colour in his cheeks now. She reached for the button in his shirt pocket.

‘It’s not there,’ her mum croaked.

Ivy turned back to face her. ‘What?’

‘The button. I saw what you did with it for your father, and when you didn’t come round, I put it in *your* pocket, hoping it would help.’

Ivy reached into her own pocket and, sure enough, felt the little button resting inside. As the warmth of her whispering spread through her, the stinging in her eyes disappeared and the pain in her head began to dull. Her legs were feeling strong again. Maybe she could even stand up. The button was working. ‘We’re gonna have to hold Dad between us,’ she told her mum. ‘The belt will do the rest. It’ll work – just don’t let go.’

Ivy’s mum looked at Ivy. Her eyes were bloodshot and ringed with dark circles, but they were trusting. She nodded, then reached for the belt.

Ivy shifted over to her dad and, with her mum’s help, pulled him upright.

‘Ivy?’ he murmured as they put their arms round him. Ivy clamped her other arm round her mum’s waist. They stank of selkie slime, but Ivy didn’t care. They were her parents. And they were alive.

‘Now raise your arms, Mum, if you can.’ She remembered how the belt simply carried you. *She should be able to do this, no matter how weak she is.*

They floated up steadily, cold air blowing through their hair. As they approached the top of the shaft, Ivy saw the rotating cage – a whirring haze of grey through the green light. She wondered who or *what* might be waiting for them behind the bars.

Suddenly the cage screeched to a halt. A shadow moved behind the bars. Ivy tried to wriggle away from it. ‘Mum, Dad, hang on!’

A hand shot through one of the gaps and grabbed Ivy by the neck, sucking all the air from her lungs. She recognized the black gloves – the knuckles encrusted with steel studs. A severe but polished face hovered at the other end of them: smooth, pale skin; long straight nose, dark glasses; thin white lips . . .

Officer Smokehart.

Emerging from the ghoul hole, Ivy collapsed onto the cold steel floor, her mum and dad falling beside her. Around her were the silvery walls of the tin-can room – the one with all the old monitors and switchboards – only this time, everything looked blurry and distorted. Officer Smokehart’s face floated in front of her eyes. She could hear his voice, but his words were out of sync with his lips.

‘. . . no one else here. The boy must have had warning we were coming and got out.’ He was talking to another underguard – the squat, red-faced constable who had arrested Ivy and Seb earlier. ‘Get some transport ready for the adults and prepare two uncommon whistles for use. They will need to have their memories stripped before we take them back to the station.’

Memories stripped . . . ? Ivy didn’t even want to imagine what that involved. She couldn’t let that happen – this was her mum and dad! Her head was swimming as she searched the room for Seb or Valian. She couldn't see either of them.

'Sir,' she heard the constable say, long before she saw the word form on his lips, 'do you want me to send a featherlight back to the station? Get some help down here to search the rest of the mansion?'

Smokehart stiffened. 'No, I'll do it myself. I don't want any stone left unturned.'

Ivy tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry. She croaked out two words. 'What . . . happened . . . ?'

Smokehart approached almost in slow motion, his dark glasses fixed on her face. 'You can hear me?' He sounded surprised. Ivy managed a nod.

'In that case,' he hissed, 'let me enlighten you.' He crouched down till he was level with her and curled his lip into a snarl. 'After you and your brother escaped from the coach, I suspected you might meet up with Valian Kaye again, so I tracked him down. I found the three of you by that fountain. I had a hunch you'd lead me somewhere interesting, but when you opened the gates to the Wrench Mansion, I couldn't quite believe it. I snuck in behind you and, once you were up the hill and out of sight, I opened the gate again to let my constable through.'

Ivy frowned, even though it hurt. She wondered *how* Smokehart had come through behind them. She hadn't seen anything.

He must have read her expression because he smiled and slowly lowered his dark glasses.

Ivy recoiled.

Smokehart's eye sockets were empty – or, no; not quite. There was a swirling cone of black dust in each of them, drilling back into his skull. Looking at them, Ivy felt cold despair. 'I'm dead,' Smokehart said matter-of-factly. 'One of the Eyre Folk, to be specific. We make excellent underguards. Strong, fast and, like many of the dead, we can disappear. So you wouldn't have seen me strolling *through* the gate behind you and waiting in the darkness.'

A chill slid down Ivy's spine. She should have guessed.

'In the mansion a trail of animal tracks led us to a door in the basement,' Smokehart continued. 'We realized it was uncommon when it opened into a different room every time. This place was the first that held any interest.'

Ivy wondered if Seb and Valian had survived the fight with the wraithmoths and selkies in the whispering hall. Smokehart couldn't have found it yet.

She turned to her parents. Her mum was slumped against the wall, her head tilted to one side. Ivy wasn't sure if she was unconscious, but her eyes were closed and her body was still. Her dad was moving feebly, trying to sit up.

'My parents,' Ivy wheezed, in a small voice. 'Are you going to help them?'

Officer Smokehart drew closer: Ivy could feel his cold, dead breath against her cheek. He shot a glance at the constable, checking he was otherwise occupied. 'Oh, don't worry about your parents, Ivy Wrench. I intend to keep them nice and snug back at the underguard station. And as soon as you and your brother are locked away beside them, I might even consider releasing your mucker mother. If you try and escape again, though . . . Well, let's just say I don't think your parents will fare too well against some of our more . . . interesting inmates.'

'What?' Ivy realized that there was no point in trying to explain about the uncommon alarm clock.

'Constable?' Officer Smokehart called. 'Are you ready with the transport?'

The constable was busy pulling two pieces of folded grey plastic out of his tool belt. 'Almost there, sir.'

Smokehart turned towards the uncommon door, which was propped open with a bucket. Through it, Ivy caught a glimpse of some dark room in the Wrench Mansion.

He sighed with pleasure. 'That house has been out of my reach for over forty years, but not any longer. Everything that happened to the Wrenches on Twelfth Night 1969 will soon become clear: how they disappeared, where they ended up, what their real motives and identities were. No more mystery. No more lies. The truth will be revealed, order will be restored and the law will finally be upheld.'

Ivy turned away. Smokehart had no idea of the real truth . . .

Something glittered at the corner of Ivy's eye. She turned to find a feather bobbing in the air, scrawling a message in front of the constable. 'Uh, sir, Lady Selena Grimes is asking what we found down here. She wants to know if there’s anything to report and whether she should be concerned for traders’ safety?’ He looked at Ivy and her parents nervously.

‘Tell her we have found one of the runaways in very incriminating circumstances and we are taking her and her parents back to the station immediately. Everything is under control.’

The constable nodded enthusiastically and began writing a reply.

Ivy gritted her teeth, wishing she could tell Smokehart the truth. *Selena Grimes is Wolfsbane. She is a member of the Dirge!*

Ivy remembered the respectful way Smokehart had acted around Selena Grimes – bowing to her orders, scared of contradicting her. She had fooled him, just like she had fooled everyone else. As Quartermaster of the Dead End, Selena Grimes had the whole of Lundinor wrapped around her little finger. Ivy wondered, with a shiver, if any of the other Dirge members had taken important positions.

Officer Smokehart grabbed her arm with his gloved hand, tightening his fingers. ‘No paperclip for you this time. I’ll keep hold of you; that way I can be certain you won’t escape.’ With his other hand, he pointed to Ivy’s parents. ‘Get them bagged up now!’

Ivy reached for her dad, who was trying to sit up beside her. ‘*Dad!’* she screamed. ‘Dad!’

‘Ivy?’ he murmured. ‘Is that you?’

The constable stepped forward; he was holding a large brass whistle on a gold chain. He bent down next to Ivy’s dad and quickly blew the thing in his ear. It made no sound at all, but Ivy’s dad went very still. His eyes began to glaze over.

‘Leave him alone!’ Ivy croaked frantically. She tried to pull herself free, but Smokehart yanked back so hard she thought her arm might be ripped out of its socket.

‘Make sure you erase everything from the last two days,’ Officer Smokehart ordered. ‘I don’t want a single memory escaping, even from the uncommon father. It is our duty to protect all uncommon secrets.’

After counting for a moment, the constable hurried round to Ivy’s dad’s other ear and repeated the procedure. Ivy’s dad slowly closed his eyes, as if drifting off into a pleasant sleep. The officer used the whistle in exactly the same way on Ivy’s mum, before unfolding two pieces of grey plastic sheeting. There was a zip down the middle of each and the words BODY BAG printed on the side. He dragged Ivy’s mum onto the first.

Ivy watched in horror: her mum’s body was quite limp. Maybe she should have left Violet’s button in her mum’s pocket for longer; the healing effects seemed to be wearing off.

Once the constable had zipped the bag over Ivy’s mum’s head, the material went flat as her body disappeared. While he started to move Ivy’s dad, Smokehart pointed at the uncommon door.

‘Make sure you keep that propped open,’ he reminded his constable. ‘I don’t want to spend another five hours trying to get back here.’

Ivy’s head felt fuzzy again. *Five hours? Wait* . . . ‘What time is it?’ she asked. She pictured the hands of the uncommon alarm clock counting down to midnight, when her parents were going to die. She could see the words of the Dirge, written by that black feather: *The clock is ticking.*

‘Just past eleven,’ Smokehart said curtly. ‘So by my calculations you’ve got a little under an hour in the cell till midnight and then’ – he grinned – ‘*Happy New Year.*’

Ivy started. ‘New Year . . . ?’

A smile creased Smokehart’s lips. ‘Oh, don’t tell me you haven’t realized.’ He looked around the room, over at the ghoul hole and then back to Ivy. ‘You’ve been stuck in that ghoul hole for over four hours.’

Chapter Thirty-two

No . . .

No, this can’t be happening.

Ivy stumbled along at Smokehart’s side as he dragged her through the gates. He was holding both her wrists together with just one of his strong hands. Now that she knew he was dead, she was no longer surprised that he seemed like a robot.

She heard the gates clang shut behind her as she stumbled out into a shadowy street in some other part of Lundinor. The place was bustling with underguards. Several constables were scraping samples of cement from the brick wall. One sergeant had bagged up a handful of leaves from the fountain basin, while another was experimentally prodding the metal surround.

Ivy tried to ignore the pain – though her body hurt all over. *It’s almost midnight*, she reminded herself, her stomach turning over. *There’s no time left.*

Ragwort and Selena Grimes were still out there, and in under an hour Ivy’s parents would be dead if she didn’t do something. She couldn’t assume that Seb or Valian had escaped. It was up to her now.

Smokehart tugged her into the street. Getting away from him was the only way to save everyone.

He must have a weakness, Ivy thought. *Everyone has a weakness.*

A few underguards spoke to Smokehart as they passed by.

‘Congratulations, sir,’ one of them said, straightening. ‘I can’t wait to read your report on Twelfth Night.’

Smokehart paused to reply, still holding Ivy in his crushing grasp.

‘As I have said all along, the key to the whole mystery is what happened in the mansion that night – that’s the evidence we’ve been lacking all these years.’

Smokehart’s words triggered a thought in Ivy’s head.

What happened in the house on Twelfth Night . . .

Ivy knew some of that already. Violet Eyelet had been there that evening, dropping off the objects she'd scouted for the Wrenches. Ivy wondered if there were any clues hiding in the details of Violet's story; clues she'd previously missed.

All at once a deafening siren went off. Ivy couldn't tell where the noise was coming from, but it was almost as loud as a selkie.

'Not now,' Smokehart groaned.

'Sir!' one of the underguards cried. 'That's Mr Punch's alarm. We need to go to the Market Cross immediately. It's the law – even for underguards.'

'I know, I know,' he grumbled. He raised his voice as he turned to the other underguards. 'Make sure you leave everything where it is. I don't want any evidence tampered with.' He glared at Ivy. 'You stay with me. Remember: I have your parents.'

In a matter of seconds the pavement was heaving with uncommoners. Smokehart shouted at them to let him through and, on the whole, they obeyed. Still, Ivy knew that this was her best chance to break away. She just needed to get away from Smokehart's iron grip.

The crowd gathered at a T-junction as everyone turned onto the Gauntlet. Smokehart was jostled, and his fingers tensed around Ivy's wrist. She noticed tiny crimson spots spreading over the pale skin of his neck. It had happened several times before, but Ivy had no idea what it meant. *Farrow's Guide* had mentioned something about Smokehart's race, the Eyre Folk. If only she could remember . . .

There was a clatter of hoofs behind them. Smoke-hart stepped aside, pulling Ivy with him, and turned to see an underguard coach. The red-faced constable was driving it.

'What are you doing here?' Smokehart spluttered. 'You're meant to be in the mansion. You've got to let us all back in!' The red spots on his neck began creeping up to his face.

'But I heard the alarm!' the constable argued, one hand securing his hat. 'It's the law. We have to go, *don't we*?'

Ivy's head spun as the information came to her: *Farrow's Guide* had said that Eyre Folk 'spook' when they're emotional – that's what the 'sweating blood' thing was called. And it was *uncontrollable* – Smokehart couldn't stop it. If she was going to escape, now was the time.

She thought for a second. Smokehart was keeping her parents at the station and she had no doubt that his threats were real. If she ran away, it might put them both in more danger . . .

But then, the Dirge's threats were real too, and they were infinitely more dangerous. After seeing the whispering hall, Ivy understood what they were capable of. It wasn't just her parents' lives at stake – it was the safety of everyone in Lundinor and beyond.

The decision was made. She had to go.

'Constable!' Smokehart roared. Ivy could see blood bubbling everywhere through his skin. 'What have you done?'

The constable slid lower in his seat. '*Sir?*'

Ivy's wrists and hands were slippery. She could see the scarlet fluid running down her arm from Smokehart's fingers; as he grew angrier, so his grip was loosening. Suddenly, with all her might, she yanked her wrists free. She dived into the crowd, pushing and squeezing until she reached the other side of the street. She could hear Smokehart's cold voice rising out of the throng behind her.

'Your parents, Ivy Wrench! I have your parents!'

Tears poured down her cheeks as she ran. She didn't care where she was heading, as long as it was away from Smokehart. Once the crowd was far behind her, she stopped in the doorway of an empty shop to get her breath back.

She pictured the uncommon alarm clock ticking away in Valian's room. There was only one sure-fire way to save her parents in time: stop the Dirge. If they got their hands on one of the Great Uncommon Good, who knew what kind of evil they'd unleash on Lundinor and on the rest of the world. She had to reach it first. Granma Sylvie *must* have left Lundinor with it on Twelfth Night. Now Ivy had a little under an hour to find out where she'd hidden it.

'Violet was in the mansion that night,' she whispered to herself as she ran through the clues. Something told her that she needed to go back and talk to Violet. She'd probably be in the Market Cross now, along with everyone else. It would be risky to go back there, though; that's where Smokehart would be.

If only Seb and Valian were still here, Ivy thought. At least then she could get a second opinion. She wondered if she had enough time to check the room above Hoff & Winkle’s Hobsmatch Emporium to see whether they’d made it. She weighed up the risks . . .

There wasn’t a moment to lose.

Chapter Thirty-three

There was a tension in the air at the Market Cross. Uncommoners stood around muttering to each other.

Flinching from the noise of the siren, Ivy pushed her way through chain mail, lace cuffs and crinoline petticoats. The crowd had gathered in a circle around the middle of the square. Stopping a few rows back, Ivy spotted a couple of familiar faces on the opposite side, but no Violet. Ethel and Mr Littlefair were standing behind a family dressed in karate gis; Johnny Hands was beside a group of traders wearing sombreros; and Albert Merribus, whose white hair was sticking out as if he'd had an electric shock, was waiting by some underguards: these ones had silver-braided epaulets and the letters SB on their lapels. *Special Branch,* Ivy realized. She noticed with a sinking feeling that Selena Grimes was nowhere to be seen.

In the centre of the square a huge oyster shell had been placed on a wooden table. Once the crowd had hushed, the shell closed, swallowing the throbbing siren with it.

Ivy stood on tiptoe to see an exceedingly tall man in a ringmaster's red tailcoat and black top hat take centre stage. A name ran in whispers through the crowd . . .

'*Mr Punch . . .*'

'*It's Mr Punch . . .*'

'*. . . the Guardian of Lundinor.*'

Ivy inspected him curiously. She recognized his name. He was the man who had beaten Octavius Wrench to the position of Quartermaster of the Great Cavern in that election on Twelfth Night 1969.

Except . . .

He didn't look old enough. This Mr Punch was fresh-faced, young and lean, with broad shoulders and a straight ginger beard. Beneath the hat, a pair of brilliant aquamarine eyes sparkled with intelligence. That colour gave Ivy an odd feeling of déjà-vu . . .

Mr Punch held a conch shell to his lips. ‘My thanks to all of you for gathering here so quickly. I’m afraid I have worrying news.’ His voice was so deep and sonorous, it sent vibrations through Ivy’s chest. ‘Yesterday, as most of you know, a trader was attacked by a wraithmoth – a creature of the dead we have not seen for many years. A few hours ago I received reports of shadows gathering outside the Great Gates.’ Mr Punch coughed and turned to address another section of the crowd. As he did so, his face seemed to change – his beard grew curly, his skin darker, and his hat disappeared. ‘Our investigations revealed evidence that selkies and wraithmoths had been in the arrivals chambers, sabotaging the air filters.’

The crowd started to mutter. Ivy frowned. *Ragwort* – the man in grey – was the one controlling the selkies and wraithmoths. He was behind this. She wondered what his motives were.

‘Our engineers are doing their utmost to restore the uncommon technology,’ Mr Punch continued, ‘but until they succeed, I’m afraid I have to insist that all living uncommoners remain in Lundinor. The air outside the Great Gates is toxic, and until the filters can be repaired it is too dangerous for you to go out.’

Ivy shuddered. *Ragwort wants everyone trapped inside . . .*

‘As you know, GUT law prevents bag travel to the common world from inside the Great Gates, so we will all have to remain here until the situation can be resolved.’ Mr Punch shifted round again, and this time his whole face appeared to change – the shape of his nose, lips and forehead. Ivy rubbed her eyes. She must still be suffering from the effects of being in the ghoul hole. Maybe it gave you hallucinations.

He cleared his throat. ‘I am confident that the underguard will find these saboteurs very soon. They have informed me that they will be responding to featherlight twenty-four hours a day. If you do see anything suspicious, I want you to report it immediately. Mr Merribus has generously offered free featherlights for the next few days.’ Ivy spotted Merribus nodding.

‘It is an uncertain time in the streets,’ Mr Punch went on – one minute he was the ringmaster; the next, an older man in a grey flannel suit. ‘I want you all to be extra vigilant and look out for each other. We have faced threats before, and we have overcome them. We are stronger when we work together and trust in each other. I would ask you all to remember that.’ His words hung in the air for a moment, before he nodded and turned away.

As Ivy watched him disappear back into the crowd, she couldn’t help wondering what he was really thinking. If he really *was* the Guardian of Lundinor, surely he suspected that the Dirge were at work again. Had he looked into Ivy and Seb’s arrest after the wraithmoth attack yesterday? And what did he plan to do about it, if anything?

The crowd began shuffling away, discussing Mr Punch’s news. Ivy craned her neck, trying to find a safe route out. Suddenly she spied a puff of fluffy white hair beneath a bobbing bonnet.

Violet.

‘Violet, over h—!’ Ivy stopped, remembering not to attract attention. She squeezed through the crowd.

Violet Eyelet turned as Ivy reached her. She was wearing two pairs of spectacles – one broken, the other fogged up. She looked more awake than she had after the wraithmoth attack, but her face was badly scratched.

‘*Ivy?*’ she whispered. ‘I thought you’d been arrested.’

‘I was,’ Ivy said. ‘Look, I need to ask you something.’

Violet glanced around warily. ‘Best not talk here; the underguard will be looking for you.’

She led Ivy out of the crowd, behind a row of empty kiosks. ‘I’m very sorry about yesterday,’ she said. ‘We all are. We shouldn’t have let Smokehart take the pair of you like that; it was monstrous of us.’ She pushed her broken spectacles further up her nose. ‘I was just so shaken up by that—’ She couldn’t say *wraithmoth*.

‘Don’t worry about that now,’ Ivy told her. ‘I need to ask you about Twelfth Night 1969. It’s important.’

Violet squinted. ‘All right, but I doubt it’ll help. I told the underguard everything before.’

Ivy hoped that there was something they’d missed. She’d been to the mansion now; she knew all about the fountain entrance and the layout inside. Maybe that would help her. ‘Can you tell me what happened when you went into the Wrench Mansion? *Exactly* what you saw?’

Violet removed her glasses and frowned. ‘Sylvie took me up the hill and into the house. Octavius wasn’t there because he was waiting for the election results at the Market Cross, so – for the first time ever – I gave my scouted objects to Helena Wrench, his wife. Helena was a sweet lady. I remember she offered me a drink of Nelson's Tipple when I got there – fancy stuff; the kind they drink in the West End. I'd never tried it before.' She smiled. 'Nor have I since.'

Ivy tried to picture it: Helena Wrench – with those sad blue eyes – greeting Violet. The image of Helena's face was one of the first memories to return to Granma Sylvie. Ivy wondered if there was more significance to it than she had previously thought.

Violet's voice lowered to a whisper. 'Helena led me into this huge dining room – candelabras along the table, chandeliers suspended from the ceiling, creepy oil paintings hanging on the walls; but she still made me feel at ease – unlike Octavius. He always looked down his nose at me. He absolutely hated me using an old sack as my collection bag; thought it was unsightly. Helena was fine with it. She . . .' Violet paused and blinked. 'Helena . . . That night she had a funny turn, I remember. I gave her my sack of objects and she let go of it right away, as if I'd handed her a hot potato. I thought I'd done something wrong because she asked me to leave immediately; virtually pushed me through the door. I didn't even have time to pick up my sack.' She frowned, struggling for the details. 'Sylvie didn't know what had come over her mother. After she'd shown me out the gates, she went back inside to see if her mother was OK. That was the last time I saw her.'

Ivy had gone very still. She stared into the middle distance as realization gripped her. *A hot potato* . . . She knew exactly what that felt like.

'Did anyone else see you?' she asked urgently. 'Was there anyone else in the mansion?'

Violet frowned. 'One of Sylvie's brothers was there, I think; he was setting the table. Blond hair, portly.'

Ivy's mind raced back to the family portrait in the Wrench Mansion. She had to steady herself against Violet's arm as the truth became clear . . .

Him. It had been him all along.

Chapter Thirty-four

The lights were on behind the dirty windows of Hoff & Winkle's Hobsmatch Emporium when Ivy finally got there. She'd had to risk asking several street bells along the way to make sure she was heading in the right direction. She scurried round the back, slipped up the stairs and stood outside the door to Valian's room. There was no sound coming from within.

Ivy closed her eyes. If Seb wasn't there, she mustn't get upset – there wasn't time. Anyway, it didn't mean he wasn't alive; it just meant he hadn't made it back. She had to go on and save their mum and dad without him, no matter what.

She opened her eyes and knocked lightly.

Nothing at first.

Silence.

Then . . .

'Ivy?'

It was Valian.

Ivy's heart pounded. The door opened inwards, and behind Valian's scrawny figure she glimpsed the outline of another person.

'Seb?' she whispered, daring to hope – though she had seen enough in the last two days to know that shadows could trick you.

'*Ivy?*' Seb's voice sounded hoarse. He got up from the bed and stepped into the light. His face was covered in angry red scratches and his hair had dried in matted dreads. As Ivy ran towards him, she heard Scratch shouting excitedly from the bed. She gave her brother a thankful hug.

'You're alive!' he sobbed. 'We didn't know what'd happened.'

Ivy allowed herself a few long breaths of relief. *He's OK* . . . She felt Seb wince as she squeezed harder, so she let go. 'Are you all right?' She turned to Valian. 'What about you?'

Valian's eyes were serious. 'We barely got away with our lives. We held them off as long as we could. I thought it was all over.'

'Me too,' Seb added. 'But then the underguard alarm sounded in the mansion, and the dead just . . . disappeared. It was like they were spooked.' He smiled glumly. 'Oh, the irony.'

Ivy thought back to what Smokehart had told her about searching the mansion. They must have used the alarm then.

'You should be proud of your brother,' Valian said. 'He was awesome with those drumsticks. It was like he'd been using them all his life. I wouldn't have survived without him.'

Seb slapped Valian on the shoulder. 'Neither of us would have survived without the other. We did OK back there – we were a team.'

Ivy smiled. It was nice to know that she and Seb had someone on their side.

'Ivy,' Seb said, 'we don't have much time left. Mum and Dad—'

'Smokehart has them at the underguard station,' Ivy told him. 'I found them after I went through that door in the whispering hall.' She reached for the uncommon alarm clock, which was lying next to Scratch on Valian's bed. The ticking spread through her body and her heart began to quicken. The black hands were hovering dangerously close to midnight; they only had half an hour left.

'I think I know how to save them,' Ivy announced, her mind racing. 'Come on – I'll explain on the way.'

They hurried through the back streets of Lundinor. The Market Cross was still busy, but further out the roads were empty: no doubt people had retreated indoors after Mr Punch's announcement. The streets were murky; mist rolled around their feet and there was a strange, musty smell in the air.

'*Selena Grimes!*' Valian exclaimed, after hearing what had happened to Ivy in the whispering hall. 'It's common knowledge that she's a ghoul, but *Wolfsbane*?' He rubbed his chin. 'I should've seen it earlier. She was Quartermaster when Rosie went missing. She's fooled everyone.' His face flushed. 'No one will believe us, though. Lady Grimes a member of the Dirge? Trust me, you need evidence before going to the underguard with that bombshell.'

Ivy knew that he was speaking from experience. 'At least *we* know who she really is.'

Seb slipped his drumsticks out of his sleeves. ‘So, they were competing to see who could find the Great Uncommon Good first . . . How did you find out who the man in grey – Ragwort – was?’

‘Violet said something about Helena Wrench that reminded me of myself; of how I reacted once when I touched something uncommon. Scratch told me that whispering runs in the family, so it made sense that our great-grandmother, Helena, was a whisperer, just like me.’ Ivy turned a corner, leading Seb and Valian out onto a wide street. ‘That night, Twelfth Night 1969, Violet brought something incredible to Helena; something so powerful that when Helena touched it, she dropped it. It must have frightened her. Violet wouldn’t have had a clue what it was, of course – she was only interested in buttons.’

Seb stopped in his tracks as he realized. ‘One of the Great Uncommon Good – that’s what she’d found?’

Valian looked dazed. ‘You’re kidding.’

Ivy shook her head gravely. ‘Helena knew how powerful it was and what it could do in the wrong hands; in the hands of her husband, for example. She must have known or suspected that he was a member of the Dirge.’

Seb set off again. ‘She must have been scared of him,’ he pointed out. ‘If she was a whisperer, she probably had to keep it secret because the Dirge ran those whispering halls.’

‘Exactly,’ Ivy agreed. ‘Helena knew she couldn’t let him find the object. Maybe she tried to destroy it; I don’t know. But it didn’t work. She had no option but to send the object away; to hide it where no one would find it.’

Seb’s eyes grew wide. ‘She gave it to Granma,’ he realized. ‘She gave it to her that very night and told her to disappear.’ He slowed down as he worked it out. ‘That’s why Granma left! That’s why she put on that bracelet; she *had* to hide herself away, she *had* to forget.’

That’s right. Ivy’s throat tightened. It was a bittersweet feeling – of sadness, but also of immense pride. Granma Sylvie had done the bravest, most selfless thing Ivy could imagine. She had voluntarily given up the memory of her whole life in order to keep the location of the Great Uncommon Good a secret.

‘And there was only one person who saw all this,’ Ivy said as they slowed down to enter a small courtyard; ‘one person who was there when Violet dropped off the object and when Helena gave it to Sylvie and told her to leave.’ She turned to Seb. ‘You remember that portrait in the

Wrench Mansion? The one that showed the whole family? There was only one member – other than Sylvie – with blond hair.' Ivy recalled a chubby face with small dark eyes and pale hair: the second-youngest of the family, Cartimore.

'So Cartimore Wrench saw the Great Uncommon Good object,' Valian summarized, 'and he's been searching for it all this time. He must have told Selena Grimes about it years ago, when he first joined the Dirge.'

Seb's eyes flashed. 'And when Granma's bracelet was cut off and she appeared again, they both restarted their campaigns to retrieve it.'

'But Granma's forgotten where it is,' Ivy said. 'That's why Cartimore sent the selkie to read my mind and planted the wraithmoth in our room at the Cabbage Moon to spy on us. This whole time Cartimore and Selena thought we knew where it was. The grimp and the grim-wolf were both in the mansion; I think Selena suspected it was hidden there.'

'So where is Cartimore now?' Seb asked. 'If he's been keeping an eye on us, he must be close by in Lundinor.'

Ivy nodded grimly. She'd been thinking about that. 'Who's the one person who knew all along the things that only Cartimore Wrench would know?' she asked, leading them round the final corner. 'Someone who gave us that clue about going north to the Wrench Mansion; someone who's been able to read all the communications across Lundinor for years.' She turned to Valian as she came to a stop. 'You told me yourself that he turned up forty years ago, right when the Wrench Family went into hiding.'

She pointed, and they all looked up at the spindly tower standing in the middle of the square in front of them: the featherlight mailhouse.

Chapter Thirty-five

Albert Merribus or Cartimore Wrench or Ragwort or the man in grey – *whoever he really was* – was nowhere to be seen. The mailhouse was empty.

Ivy, Seb and Valian found themselves in a circular room. Desks and bookshelves were covered in dirty teacups, leather-bound books, jars of different-coloured feathers and old cheese rinds. On one side, a stained porcelain wash basin was fixed to the wall, and hanging between the eaves of the pointed roof was a ratty canvas hammock. Ivy sniffed, smelling old socks, dust and bird poo. She guessed that Cartimore had been living here alone all these years, his anger and obsession festering.

She heard a scratching noise and turned round to find Valian clambering out from beneath one of the desks. ‘There’s an uncommon map down here with the name Sylvie Wrench on it,’ he said. ‘That’s what Cartimore’s been using to track your gran. It shows that she’s in the hospital right now.’

Ivy’s eyes fixed on an upturned garden hoe propped against the wall. A wrinkled grey trench coat and wide-brimmed hat were hanging from it – the clothes of the man in grey.

‘Guys,’ Seb said, his voice unsteady. ‘There’s another door here.’ Ivy hadn’t seen it at first because it was exactly the same colour as the walls, like tea-stained paper. She recognized it as Seb rubbed the dust off. ‘It’s the Ragwort door from the Hexroom.’ He tried opening it, but it wouldn’t budge. ‘Well, I guess this means we’re definitely right: Merribus *is* Ragwort. What do we do now?’

Ivy racked her brains. All the evidence was there now. Surely Smokehart would have to believe them.

Valian got to his feet. ‘I’m going after them,’ he said in a tight voice. ‘Wolfsbane *and* Ragwort. They might know where Rosie is.’

Ivy opened her mouth, but she could see there was no point in trying to stop him. His jaw was set. She nudged open the door they'd come in through. She didn't want to split up again – they'd only just got back together – but the clock was ticking. She could almost feel it, slicing away precious seconds while they were standing there deciding what to do. 'I think the only way to do this is to split up,' she said.

Valian checked his uncommon trowel. It wasn't glowing . . . yet. 'Agreed. I'll go to the Dead End. My guess is that Selena will be prowling around there; it's her territory, after all.'

Seb's face was serious. 'Ivy, one of us has to go to the underguard station. Mum and Dad are still in there. Whatever's coming for them, we've got to stop it.'

Ivy retrieved the uncommon alarm clock from her pocket, flinching as her whispering started up. The hands were still black. The clock face shimmered, but she looked away before the image of her mum's face appeared.

'We *have* to protect them,' she said firmly.

'I'll go,' Seb offered. 'We don't have time to argue.'

Ivy gave a shaky nod. She didn't fancy Seb's chances against one or more of the Dirge's dead cronies, but they didn't have time to come up with a better plan. 'All right then. I'll go to the House of Bells and find Ethel and then Violet. With their help, we might be able to convince Smokehart of the truth about Granma Sylvie, and maybe he can stop the Dirge before it's too late.'

She looked back down into the deadly face of the alarm clock. The spindly black hands were approaching midnight.

Ivy gazed up at the shop. Like its neighbours, the House of Bells looked dark and empty. The blind was drawn over the main window, and through the glass door Ivy could see only the rough outline of the front room, sketched in shadows in the darkness.

A thought struck her: *What if Ethel hasn't made it back yet?*

She climbed the steps to the front door and opened it quietly. Voices greeted her as she stepped over the threshold, but they weren't Ethel's.

'Really, Cartimore,' a dry voice chided. 'Disabling the air filters was a clumsy plan. Everyone suspects something – the underguard have been swarming all over the place. If all you needed to do was to empty this building, there are easier ways. Your methods are always so crude. Do you want people to uncover your identity?'

Ivy went very still as the door clicked shut behind her. Had she heard that name correctly . . . *Cartimore*?

She tiptoed towards a thin sliver of light coming from the door to the storeroom, staring open-mouthed at the walls. Every single bell had been covered in some sort of thick slime which, she guessed from the eye-watering smell in the air, was probably of selkie origin. Even the desk bell – as large and powerful as it was – had been silenced behind a membrane of green jelly, prevented from moving even a centimetre to release a squeak of alarm.

'It wouldn't be such a bad thing,' a coarse voice replied. 'I'd love to see the faces of the half-wits around here when they realize who I really am. Just for a moment I'd like to see their eyes – to see their fear again.' He sniggered. Ivy could hear the cantankerous tones of Albert Merribus mixed with something more intelligent.

There came a crunch and a hiss from the storeroom. Cartimore cursed. 'It must be here somewhere; it must be. Those runts of Sylvie's have been in here every day since they arrived in Lundinor, and Ethel Dread was Sylvie's friend when we were younger. The children have given it to her for safekeeping, I know they have.'

There was a sigh. 'I have no patience for your guesswork,' the other voice said, and Ivy suddenly recognized it: *Selena Grimes*. 'Need I remind you that when you joined the Dirge you made a binding deal, Cartimore? If your sister ever came out of hiding, you would tell us how to find the object and we would do everything in our power to help you get it back from her. Now, we have fulfilled our end of the bargain. Where is the object?'

Cartimore growled. 'Don't pretend you're doing this for the Dirge. I know you've been hunting for it behind my back, hoping to use it for yourself. Do you think I didn't notice that grimp of yours sneaking into the mansion after me?'

'Look at my hands,' Selena snapped. 'They bear the mark of loyalty, the same as yours. Everything I have done has been in the service of the Dirge. Our brothers and sisters of the Fallen Guild are closer than ever before to finding the other four Great Uncommon Good. Very soon the six of us will be unrivalled in our power. But first we need the object you promised us when you joined. Now, if it's not here and it's not in the mansion, then where, oh where, dear Cartimore, is it? Or do I have to consider the possibility that you were lying all along?'

Ivy had a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, listening to the Dirge's plans. Whatever they intended to use the Great Uncommon Good for, it couldn't be good.

'What do you think, Goblin, my sweet?' Selena called gently. 'Maybe you can help refresh Cartimore's memory . . .'

Ivy heard the padding of heavy paws. 'As you wish, mistress,' a voice growled. The jelly surrounding the desk bell quivered. *Goblin*. The last time Ivy had seen the grim-wolf was just before the grimp threw her in the ghoul hole. Her chest tightened.

'Now, Selena, there's . . . no need for that.' Cartimore's voice wobbled. 'You must believe me. I saw it in my sister's hands when I was a boy – an old sack, easy to miss. My mother told her it was one of the Great Five. It must have power beyond imagining.'

Ivy tried to think. *An old sack* . . . *That* was what they were after? It must have been Violet's bag – the one she carried her scouted objects in.

In front of her, the desk bell started to shake, murmuring something. Ivy couldn't understand what it was saying.

Goblin howled in warning. 'There's someone outside, mistress!'

A cold shiver ran down the nape of Ivy's neck. She had to get out of there.

Too late, she turned to make a dash for it, but the grim-wolf had already heard her. It came tearing through the storeroom door, slamming it open with a *bang!* Ivy froze. The wolf's eyes were fixed on her face. She scrambled backwards.

And then fell . . .

She landed with a thud behind the counter. Pain shot up her spine as the wolf made an about-turn, lightning quick, and sprang towards her. She was faintly aware of the desk bell trying to speak from within its gelatinous prison, but before she had time to think about it, Selena Grimes came slinking *through* the back wall and stopped right at Ivy's feet. Cartimore followed behind her, limping through the open doorway.

'Well, well, Goblin' – Selena smiled at her grim-wolf – 'what have you found here?' She had taken off her gloves, and Ivy saw that her hands were squirming with maggots, the skin flaking off around blackened fingernails.

Ivy's body pulsed with terror. She was trapped. There was nowhere to go. Even if she could get out, the grim-wolf would chase her. Somewhere in the back of her mind she noted the fact that Selena Grimes was dead – a ghoul, if she had to guess. Selena was tall and her feet were once again covered by an ankle-length dress.

'Why, if it isn't the grand-niece herself, dropping by for a visit!' Selena clapped her rotting hands together. 'How delightful, Cartimore.' She bent down towards Ivy, her smile revealing needle-sharp teeth. 'I think she's come alone.'

Ivy stared at her great-uncle in horror. He looked nothing like his portrait. There, he was painted with a full head of golden-blond hair and appeared over-fed. Now he was gaunt and bony. His frayed clothes were stained and he moved around awkwardly like a man twice his age. 'The runt is no grand-niece of mine,' he growled, his lips curling back into a snarl. 'Step aside, Selena; I'll deal with her myself.' He approached Ivy, limping. She tried to retreat. 'You should never have been born in the first place,' he spat. His eyes were the same amber colour as Granma Sylvie's, but all the warmth had been sucked out of them. 'Sylvie dishonoured the family by marrying a commoner. You and the rest of her offspring have brought shame upon the Wrench name. And *she* was the person who forced me into hiding. Forty years I've lived in that grubby little hole. Forty years listening, waiting, *hunting* for her. She deserves to pay for this – for what she made me!'

'Cartimore, please.' Selena Grimes's voice sliced through his rant. 'There isn't time for this. You've already set the alarm clock. Your puppets will see to it that the parents die at midnight. You can finish your little reunion later; the girl isn't going anywhere. Right now, we need to establish whether the object is here or not.'

Cartimore quaked with fury. 'But I must eliminate her now, Selena, don't you see? She is like the rotten part of the apple. She needs to be cut out.' He fished around in his pocket and withdrew a metal corkscrew. The device gave an angry snake-like hiss – Ivy could have sworn she saw a forked tongue protruding from the end.

Selena rolled her eyes. 'Fine, if you must. But be quick about it and don't make a mess.'

Cartimore beamed as he extended his hand towards Ivy. The corkscrew shimmered and flashed with white light. It was coming to life, twitching and shivering. ‘Where is it, runt? Where did you put it?’

Ivy stared at the corkscrew. Fear overwhelmed her senses. She was going to die *right now*. Her mind drifted to Seb, her mum, her dad and Granma Sylvie. She pictured the faces of her friends at school and of the traders she’d met in Lundinor. She thought of Scratch.

‘*Elsells,*’ murmured a soft voice. ‘*Els ells.*’

Ivy blinked.

‘*Els bells,*’ the voice said again urgently. ‘Hell’s bells, Ivy! *Hell’s bells!*’

Ivy snapped back to reality. She’d inched away from the corkscrew and now had her back against the corner of the desk. Her hand was resting on the slime-covered base of the desk bell. And it felt oddly warm; splinters of heat were shooting up her arm.

‘*Hell’s bells!*’ the voice shouted again – Ivy realized it was just in her head. ‘Ivy Sparrow! Can you hear me?’

It was the desk bell. Ivy glanced at it. It was her whispering that was doing this. She could feel it.

‘Hell’s bells, Ivy. Hell’s bells.’

Ivy had seen that phrase before; she looked for the glass case behind Ethel’s desk. It was covered in slime, but the bells within it were . . . *free*.

‘Unless you tell me, runt, this is going to sting a little.’ Cartimore cackled, lunging towards Ivy’s throat with the corkscrew. It had now completed its transformation into a metal snake the size of a longsword. Its scales were silvery black like the night sky, its eyes two soulless slashes of pitch. As the snake opened its mouth, its fangs glittered, and at the back of its throat Ivy saw the darkness light up with flame.

She dived to her left and, in one swift movement, smashed the ebony-framed glass case with her knuckles. Ivy ignored the pain and grabbed the rope at the bottom of each bell, shaking them violently.

A shrill voice coughed. ‘*Cerberus!*’ the bell on the left called.

‘*Erebus!*’ the right bell added.

Then together: ‘*WAAAALLLLKIES!*’

Ivy slumped back against the wall as the ground shook. A sound like an approaching train filled the room. Cartimore scrambled away, trying to control the snake, which was squirming in his hands, desperate to escape. His face paled, and as Ivy watched in horror, the blood vessels in his eyes burst.

‘Selena! What’s happening . . . ? *Argh!’* he screamed as the serpent finally broke free and slithered off across the floor and under the front door. ‘You idiot girl!’ he shouted, and dived towards Ivy, lashing out with his gloved hand. She gritted her teeth as his knuckles met her cheek.

The grim-wolf howled. Selena swept up her skirt into one hand, revealing air between her and the floor. She turned towards the wall, aiming for a quick exit. ‘Cartimore, there isn’t time! Go! Get out of here! The beasts will be—’

But before she could finish her warning, the dogs arrived. Now Ivy realized why the bells were called hell’s bells: they had summoned the *hounds of hell*. Two dogs, each the size of a horse, smashed through the back wall. They steamed with heat, and around their feet the wooden floor was smoking. The air filled with the noxious smells of sulphur and charcoal. Shards of wood pierced the gunge that had imprisoned the bells, which immediately started screaming, ‘ETHEL!’ ‘GUARDS!’ ‘HELP!’

Ivy looked down. The hellhounds had missed her by inches, but Cartimore was lying in a heap, covered in slime. Goblin took one look at the hounds, gave a whine, and disappeared into the folds of Selena’s black skirt.

‘S-Selena!’ Cartimore shouted, his voice wobbling. ‘H-help me!’

Selena glanced at the hounds and glided halfway through the wall. Only her head and shoulders remained in the room.

Cartimore didn’t seem surprised by her betrayal. He simply stuck his hand inside his coat and pulled out what looked like a glossy celebrity magazine.

‘Don’t look at it, Ivy,’ a voice urged. ‘Uncommon magazines stun people. He’s trying to paralyse the hounds.’

Ivy turned. The desk bell was talking to her again, though this time not in her head – the slime that had encased the bells was dissolving now that the hell-hounds had arrived.

‘It won’t work,’ the bell insisted. ‘The hounds are impervious to uncommon objects. Only the bells can order them back to hell.’

The hellhounds assessed the room with their fire-pit eyes. At the sight of Cartimore their growling intensified. They sniffed the air and opened their mouths, forked black tongues rolling out over their colossal teeth. Ivy was fairly certain that they wanted to eat Cartimore and then destroy the entire place before running out onto the streets of Lundinor. *Just a nice* *little walkies; sure.* She looked over her shoulder. The two hell's bells were still swinging slightly on their hooks.

The desk bell spoke. 'Ring them again.'

Ivy heard angry knocking. She looked over the top of the counter to see Selena disappearing through the wall. *Damn*. Ivy couldn't believe she'd escaped. She turned, and through the front door saw Officer Smokehart, Ethel and Valian.

She was so relieved, she almost forgot to ring the bells. Then the hellhounds barked. The glass in the front door and window shattered, sending the visitors tumbling backwards. Ivy came to her senses, grabbed the cord beneath each bell and shook them frantically.

'*Cerberus!*' the first bell yelled. '*Erebus!*' the second followed.

'*HOME TIME!*'

The hellhounds groaned and stamped their feet, sending a shower of flames around the room. Ivy started coughing. It was growing difficult to breathe.

Tendrils of black smoke crept up through the floorboards and wrapped themselves around each hound. The floor opened up, the wooden boards splitting apart, revealing only darkness and flames beneath. The hounds barked loudly before leaping into the pit.

The shop was left sizzling and stinking of sulphur. The bells shook off slime to douse the small fires, and through the thick smoke Ivy saw the unmistakable outline of her brother.

In the centre of the room, Cartimore groaned as a tall figure in black loomed over him.

'Cartimore Edward Wrench,' Officer Smokehart announced, 'I arrest you in the name of the four quartermasters of Lundinor. You have the right to remain silent, but anything you do say can be used against you in an uncommon court of trade.' He bent down and used a paperclip to fasten Cartimore's hands together.

Seb reached to help Ivy up. 'Seb – the alarm clock,' she whispered. 'We have to check it.'

She got it out of her pocket. The glass was still dirty and the bells rusted, but the hands were no longer black. They had turned white now, and had moved past midnight. Ivy saw her reflection in the glass. Her face was black with soot and splattered with slime, and her hair plastered to her forehead. But she wasn't dying, and the rotting faces of her parents were no longer visible. The countdown to their death had stopped. The Dirge had failed.

Ivy threw her arms around Seb. *It's over*, she thought. *It's really over.*

She spied Officer Smokehart looking right at her. 'Charges relating to you and the wraithmoth attack are dropped,' he said. His voice sounded detached, although there was the hint of a smile on his lips. She noticed the other underguards, gaping at the man Smokehart had just called Cartimore Wrench.

For the first time ever, Ivy thought, Smokehart actually looked happy. He had solved part of the Twelfth Night mystery, after all.

Chapter Thirty-six

Ivy stood gazing up at a pointy-roofed, two-storey building with leaded windows and fig-purple walls. Around her, uncommoners were emerging from shops and taverns into the morning hush. There was a buzz of conversation – as there had been every morning since the arrest of Cartimore Wrench. Ivy spotted a skinny boy on a flying rug zipping around the chimney tops, throwing newspapers down onto the doorsteps below. She wondered if yesterday's trial would be on the front pages . . .

She stretched contentedly. Last night, which she had spent in her own bed at home, had been untroubled by dreams of the uncommon alarm clock. Her body was healing, even though she'd probably still have the bruises when she went back to school next week. She wondered if her friends would ask her what she'd done for New Year's Eve.

She'd have to lie, if they did. The truth was a secret only she, Seb and Granma Sylvie could share.

Ivy climbed the steps to the front door of Mr Punch's Curiosity Shop. The leaded windows sparkled; behind them, seashells, mirrors, teacups and other trinkets danced around at the end of silver chains. Above the door was a large wooden sign showing a black top hat – like the one Mr Punch had worn to deliver his emergency announcement. She paused as she wondered again why he had sent a featherlight to invite her here today. He was the most important man in Lundinor, after all, and she was a nobody.

The hanging objects jangled as Ivy pushed the front door open and stepped inside. Immediately she sensed that there was something different about this shop. Huge apricot-coloured ceiling lamps filled the room with warm light, and the air was perfumed with incense, which made her nose tingle. Bizarrely the floor was covered in sand, which crunched underfoot. The room was full of glass cabinets and metal trunks; the counters were crammed with the widest selection of *stuff* Ivy had ever seen in one place.

She carefully made her way forward, gaping at the objects on display. She could see why it was called a *curiosity* shop. She wondered what abilities each of the items possessed. Perhaps uncommon fountain pens were mightier than swords and uncommon pocket watches could turn back time. She doubted you wore uncommon ice-skates on your feet.

One object in particular caught Ivy's eye. Next to a white-lace parasol was a fur-trimmed tabard. She picked it up and saw that it was embroidered with gold flowers.

She frowned. She'd seen it before – on that bony man who had helped her escape from the underguard coach.

Next to the tabard lay a wooden sign. One edge was splintered, but she could tell that it wasn't uncommon. She read the words painted on the front:

INVISIBILITY CANDLES: 8 GRADE

Wait a sec . . .

Ivy was puzzled. The candle trader had been holding this sign, the morning she first arrived in Lundinor. Why on earth would it be here, in Mr Punch's curiosity shop?

Her mind buzzing, she jerked as a voice broke the silence.

'Hello there.'

Ivy turned round, the tabard flapping in her hand. She squinted into the shadows at the back of the shop. 'Hello?' she called uncertainly. 'Uh, my name's—'

'I know who you are.' It was a voice Ivy had never heard before: well-spoken but warm, like that of your favourite teacher.

She coughed and slowly slid the tabard back onto the shelf. 'Um, Mr Punch asked me to stop by—'

'Indeed he did,' the voice agreed, a little louder. Slowly a face appeared out of the darkness. Ivy inhaled with surprise. A middle-aged man with spectacles and a wiry white beard stepped forward. He was wearing a smart blue shirt with a black waistcoat and matching trousers. It was the kind of thing Ivy's dad might wear; definitely *not* the Hobsmatch of someone who traded in Lundinor. She looked at the man carefully. She didn't recognize him. Maybe he was Mr Punch's assistant.

‘Happy New Year, Ivy Sparrow,’ he said, smiling. ‘I didn’t get a chance to tell you yesterday, when I met you in court.’

Ivy frowned. She could swear she’d never seen this man before. ‘Uh – are you sure we met yesterday? I don’t—’

Just then, she saw his face change. His white beard shortened, his spectacles disappeared and his skin turned the colour of milky tea.

‘Oh yes, I’m sure. I’m the one who thanked you, remember? For saving the citizens of Lundinor? For unmasking one of the members of the Dirge? It was a clever and brave thing that you and your brother did – and under so much pressure from that uncommon alarm clock.’

Ivy narrowed her eyes. It was Mr Punch who had said all those things to her yesterday . . .

She thought back to Cartimore’s trial. It had been their evidence – hers and Seb’s, along with the incriminating map and door that Smokehart had found in the featherlight mailhouse – that had helped convict Cartimore of organizing the wraithmoth attack and paying the selkies to sabotage the air filters. However, Cartimore had refused to answer any of the underguard’s questions about his motives, so everyone in Lundinor was none the wiser about the Great Uncommon Good and the true reason for Granma Sylvie’s disappearance.

At the end of Ivy’s statement Smokehart had asked her if there was anything she wished to add, but she had shaken her head. Nobody would have believed her about Selena Grimes, least of all Smokehart. Ethel had agreed that she and Seb should keep the information secret until they could all find proper evidence. Still, Ivy couldn’t help feeling that somewhere out there, Selena and the three remaining members of the Dirge were plotting to find the other four Great Uncommon Good.

The bearded man tilted his head. ‘Do you wish things had turned out differently?’

Ivy frowned. She didn’t want to consider the *what if*s; it would only make her frustrated and bitter – like Cartimore had become after all those years. The truth was, Selena Grimes couldn’t hide any more. Wherever and whenever she and the Dirge made their next move, Ivy, Seb, Valian and the others would be there, waiting for them. For all the death threats and danger, it seemed like everything had happened for a reason. Granma Sylvie now knew the truth about her past – which meant that Ivy and Seb had discovered their heritage as uncommoners, as part of Lundinor. Ivy wouldn’t change that for the world.

‘No,’ she answered finally. ‘Cartimore’s gone now, that’s what counts.’ *Gone to a ghoul hole for life*, she reminded herself.

The man smiled. ‘Good. Now I have a gift for you.’ He turned round and retrieved something from the counter behind him, then beckoned her over.

Ivy stepped forward nervously. She wasn’t sure why he would be giving her anything – no one gave anything for free in Lundinor.

He handed her a pair of small white gloves.

‘These are for *me*?’ On an impulse, she put them on. They were made of soft cotton with tucks over the knuckles, like smart dress gloves. A brown paper tag had been tied to one of the fingers. When Ivy held it up she discovered neat handwriting on the back:

Awarded to Miss Ivy Sparrow in gratitude for her highly commendable efforts in the fight against the Dirge.

Ivy smiled. She could feel the uncommon nature of the gloves – a gentle warmth – soaking through her fingertips and igniting her whispering. ‘But . . . these are uncommon,’ she said. ‘Does this mean that I can *take the glove*?’

The man chuckled and looked at the gloves approvingly. ‘It means you have just taken it.’

Ivy stared down at her hands. The gloves were whispering in a way no other object had before. Her skin tingled and even her feet grew warm, as if she was standing in a hot bath. In her ears she could hear singing – not just one voice, but a whole choir, haunting and beautiful. She felt like she was being welcomed home.

Her eyes gleamed. ‘Thank you.’ She watched the man curiously as his face changed again. His beard disappeared and a sprinkling of freckles spread across his forehead. ‘Um – are you . . . Mr Punch?’ she asked.

‘Most know me by that name, yes.’ His blue-green eyes twinkled. Ivy now knew why they seemed so familiar.

‘I’ve met you before . . . You gave me that invisibility candle in the arrivals chamber . . . and helped us escape from the underguard coach. That was you both times, wasn’t it?’ There had indeed been something a bit too convenient about their lucky escape. ‘Why do you look different every time I see you?’

Mr Punch leaned back against the counter. ‘I’m a hob, Ivy,’ he said. ‘One of the rarest races of the dead. Hobs are made from more than one soul, and our appearance can change.’ His face blurred and shifted – first he was Mr Punch, then the shop assistant, the bony man and the old candle trader. ‘Not everyone is able to see us changing, however. Only whisperers.’

Ivy blushed, realizing that Mr Punch must know her secret. ‘You’ve been helping me all along,’ she said. ‘Why?’

His turquoise eyes looked at her kindly. ‘I’ve been watching over you and your family for a long time, Ivy Sparrow. Your granma came to me on Twelfth Night 1969 asking for help; asking for something to keep her and the Great Uncommon Good safe. I had been fighting the Dirge for years; I was aware that if they got hold of the object, the consequences would be unthinkable. It was I who gave your granma the uncommon bracelet. I understood that if she ever reappeared, it meant that the bracelet had come off.’

Ivy realized then why people called Mr Punch the Guardian of Lundinor. She wondered in how many other ways he had protected people from the Dirge. ‘Do you know where my granma hid the Great Uncommon Good? Did she tell you?’

Mr Punch’s face changed once more. His nose got bigger, his skin blanched and his hair grew ginger and curly. A black top hat appeared on his head. ‘Your granma made sure that only she knew where the object was hidden. That way, it was only her memory that had to be erased.’

Ivy couldn’t imagine how Granma Sylvie had made such a decision. She wondered where she’d have hidden something as dangerous as one of the Great Uncommon Good. Her granma must have felt so much pressure to get it right. She might even have been heading for the hiding place when she had her car accident.

Ivy shivered. *The accident in the snow.* Granma Sylvie had never meant for that to happen; it wasn’t part of the plan. It must have been caused by her memory loss – maybe it all started while she was driving, throwing her off course . . .

Which meant she wouldn’t have had time to hide the Great Uncommon Good.

Which meant she must have kept it with her all this time, not knowing what it was . . .

Ivy remembered Cartimore telling Selena that the object was an old sack, easy to miss.

Oh . . . my . . .

Ivy went very still.

Mr Punch's white beard returned. He nodded towards the door. 'It is time to leave now, I think.'

Ivy wandered over to the door in a trance. *It had been there the whole time . . . The whole time!*

'I'll see you again next trading season,' Mr Punch said as he held the door open for her. 'You'll enjoy Lundinor in the spring. It's very . . . different.'

Ivy skidded to a halt in front of the Great Gates. Valian and Seb were waiting for her beneath the stone feet of Sir Clement.

'Well?' Seb asked. 'What did Mr Punch want?'

Ivy shook her head, too out of breath to speak. Still panting, she held up her newly gloved hands.

'You took the glove?' Seb realized. 'Cool. Do you think they'll let me do that? Next time, maybe.'

Ivy was glad that he wanted to visit Lundinor again, like she did.

Valian nudged her shoulder. 'Well done, kid. Welcome to the family. And look – they've made it official.' He slid a copy of the *Barrow Post* in front of her. 'This was printed this morning.'

Ivy scanned the headlines:

NEW YEAR'S EVE CLOSES WITH A BANG!
SON OF OCTAVIUS WRENCH DISCOVERED POSING AS MAILMASTER FOR OVER FORTY YEARS

She followed Valian's finger down to the small paragraph at the bottom of the page.

> Lundinor welcomes to the Trade the great-grandchildren of Octavius Wrench, fourteen-year-old Sebastian and eleven-year-old Ivy Sparrow, who have lived their whole lives as commoners. Their bloodline will be of some concern to many traders in Lundinor and around the world, especially in light of the dramatic revelations of New Year's Eve. Mr Punch himself, however, has vouched for their innocence; it seems they knew nothing of the Trade. It has

> been revealed that their grandmother, Sylvie Sparrow (formerly Wrench), has been living the past four decades as a victim of an uncommon memory-loss bracelet. The International Uncommon Council has decreed that all former charges against her be dropped, following her cooperation and assistance in the arrest of her brother, Cartimore. Ms Sparrow arrives in Lundinor with a considerable uncommon inheritance, as the sole owner of the Wrench estate. Underguards of the First Cohort have confirmed that her two grandchildren were in fact arrested for engineering a wraithmoth attack on 31 December, but have since been cleared. Officer Smokehart, who made the arrest, was unavailable for comment. After solving part of the Twelfth Night mystery, he will no doubt be in line for promotion in time for the reopening of Lundinor in the spring.

Ivy felt Seb's hand on her shoulder. 'Uh, Ivy, when you've finished reading that, do you wanna tell me why you made me get this dirty old thing from Granma Sylvie's back garden? I didn't really understand your featherlight.'

Ivy looked up from the newspaper. 'Did you bring it?'

Seb eyed her strangely and passed across the tattered old hessian sack that Granma Sylvie grew potatoes in. Ivy removed her gloves and held out her hands. As soon as her fingers brushed the rough material, fire shot through them, into her hand and then along her forearm. She heard a voice mumbling incoherently. Ivy's stomach turned over, and she dropped the sack immediately.

'Ivy?' Seb asked. 'What's wrong?'

She blinked back tears of pain as her body returned to normal. She straightened up again. 'I remember tripping over this before,' she croaked. 'Only I didn't touch it. Actually I've *never* touched it.'

Seb nodded. 'Yeah, so what . . . ?' His voice died in his throat.

Valian stared down at the bag in shock. 'No. Way.'

Ivy put her gloves back on, reached down and picked up the bag. 'It's the most powerful uncommon bag in existence,' she said simply. 'One of the Great Uncommon Good. Who knows where it could transport you?'

Valian gawped at it, while Seb peered around, checking that there was no one close by.

Ivy looked at Valian. She thought of his tiny room and wondered what his life was like in the common world. His sole concern was finding Rosie – Ivy knew that. She imagined what it would be like to lose Seb.

'I'm giving it to you,' she told Valian decisively. 'I don't want it.' She had no desire to use one of the Great Uncommon Good. Why did she need that much power? And anyway, the bag might be able to help Valian find his sister.

Very slowly he took the bag and said, ‘You know, my deal with Ethel is over. I don’t have to be your bodyguard any more.’

Ivy smiled sadly and nodded. She would miss him. She’d fought alongside him; he’d put everything on the line to help save her and Seb and their parents. They were now friends for life.

‘I’ve been looking for Rosie on my own for ever,’ Valian added. ‘I thought that working with other people would slow me down, but over the last few days I’ve realized that I could use a whisperer and an uncommon drummer.’

Ivy smiled. ‘We could use a scout too.’

‘I can’t promise it won’t be dangerous,’ Valian warned.

Seb shrugged. ‘Danger isn’t my issue. I’m more concerned about this . . .’ He fished around in the pocket of his hoodie and brought out a USB stick. ‘No decent drummer would be seen dead with someone who doesn’t listen to The Ripz. This has their first two albums on it.’ He handed the memory stick over to Valian. ‘It’s my only condition.’

‘If you insist.’ Valian smiled. ‘Actually that reminds me: Ethel told me to give you this, Ivy.’ He pulled a familiar tarnished silver bell out of his pocket and handed it over.

‘Scratch!’ Ivy cried, taking him gratefully.

Scratch whirred. ‘Ivy! Asked Scratch Ethel if staying with you and didn’t Ethel no say.’

Ivy saw that there was a note attached and turned him over to read it:

Just remember: he’s on loan. If you want to pay for him, he’s four and a half grade. Non-negotiable.

She laughed. Valian cocked his head, reading the note over her shoulder. ‘Typical. She never bargains.’

The street bell swayed. ‘*The departure caverns are located on the other side of the main arrivals chamber,*’ it said in a stiff voice. ‘*Third tunnel on the left.*’

Ivy let go of the clanger. ‘This way home,’ she told Seb.

Together they plodded across the chamber. The last time Ivy had been there it had been throbbing with noise and activity, but now it was strangely empty. Abandoned trunks and suitcases lined the walls and the stalactites loomed overhead, casting spiky fingers of shadow across the floor.

In the distance Ivy spied a figure with a large bag emerging from one of the tunnels.

Seb nudged her shoulder. ‘Is that who I think it is?’

She squinted into the distance. The traveller had a head of long pale hair that appeared to glow in the yellow light. ‘*Granma Sylvie . . . ?*’

Ivy dashed towards her, but Seb, as always, got there first.

‘Granma!’ he called, his arms wide as he reached her side. Ivy laughed as Granma Sylvie’s face turned crimson.

‘Nice to see you too,’ she said, her voice muffled by Seb’s embrace. She pushed him away and straightened up. ‘You look older,’ she told him. ‘And stronger. I heard you managed to keep up your drum practice while you were away . . .’

Seb shrugged, smiling. ‘Needs must, Granma.’

‘What are you doing here?’ Ivy asked, her arms round Granma Sylvie. ‘Mum said you wouldn’t be discharged from hospital till tomorrow.’

Her granma smiled mischievously. ‘The doctors let me out early. Your parents have invited me up to London for a few days to rest. I think they want to look after me, poor things. Of course, I only accepted so that I could spend some time with you two. You’re meant to be at the shops right now, according to them.’

Ivy’s mouth opened and closed as she stepped back. They’d had to tell a little white lie in order to return to Lundinor.

‘Don’t worry – I covered for you,’ Granma Sylvie reassured them. ‘But dinner will be on the table in thirty minutes, so we’d better get out of here.’

Ivy wondered how Granma Sylvie felt about being back in Lundinor after all this time. The events of the past few days . . . it wasn’t the kind of thing you could get over quickly. It was going to take a long time. There were still lots of questions, and not all of them would be answered.

‘How are you?’ Ivy asked. ‘I mean, *really*.’

Granma Sylvie ran a hand through Ivy’s thick curls. ‘All the better for seeing you,’ she admitted. ‘I just can’t believe who was behind all this.’

Ivy shivered. *Cartimore* . . . She wondered what her granma thought about him being imprisoned in a ghoul hole.

‘I know he’s my brother,’ Granma Sylvie said, ‘but it doesn’t feel like it. I have no memories of us growing up together and we certainly don’t share the same values now.’

‘What’s that thing people say about the black sheep of the family?’ Seb asked. ‘There’s always one?’

‘In the case of my family, it appears there was *more* than one. Still, Cartimore’s gone now; he can’t hurt any of us again.’ Granma Sylvie smiled. ‘And anyway, I’ve gained more than I’ve lost. Ethel never gave up on me all these years; our friendship is a gift I’m going to treasure.’

Ivy held Granma Sylvie’s hand as they set off. ‘Does any of it seem familiar yet?’ she asked. She’d been dying to discuss it all – to tell her granma about all the amazing things she’d seen, and see if Granma Sylvie remembered any of them.

Granma Sylvie’s eyes grew misty as she looked at the Great Gates in the distance. ‘It’s strange, but all I really remember is the smell of this place: like leather and boot polish and hot chestnuts. It smells like . . . home.’ Her voice cracked as she finished. ‘I’ve spoken to Mr Punch. He gave me these . . .’

She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a long glove. It was made of old yellowed silk, with an elasticated frilled cuff. ‘When I put them on, it’s like wearing a uniform. I can feel that they’re special, only I can’t remember the job I’m meant to do with them.’ She sighed. ‘It might be a long time before my memory recovers, if it ever does.’

‘Well then,’ Seb said cheerily, patting her on the shoulder, ‘you’ll just have to learn about everything with us.’

Ivy squeezed Granma Sylvie’s hand. ‘That’s right. We’ll do it together.’

As they made their way back to the departures chamber, Ivy’s thoughts turned to home, to London. ‘Do you think Mum and Dad are going to be all right?’ she asked. ‘Do you think they’ll get over it?’

‘Get over the flu, you mean?’ Seb reminded her. After the underguards had wiped their parents’ memories with uncommon whistles, false memories had been implanted of contracting a virus and being bedridden for the whole of New Year. Ivy would have to be careful not to slip up and reveal the truth.

‘I think they’ll be OK,’ Granma Sylvie said. ‘Let’s just keep an eye on them.’

‘*OK?*’ Seb retorted. ‘Dad looks better than ever after those buttons Violet used on him! Have you *seen* his hair? And Mum looks about ten years younger as well – she thinks it’s that face cream I got her for Christmas.’

Ivy couldn’t help laughing.

‘So did you really meet Mr Punch, then?’ Seb asked her.

‘Oh yes. I’ll explain it all when we’re home.’

‘Ivy,’ he said, looking at her new gloves. ‘We are gonna come back here, right? Valian said it opens again in the spring.’

Ivy shrugged. ‘I think we have to. Someone’s got to stop Selena.’

Seb nodded gravely. ‘Yeah.’ His mouth twitched into a smile. ‘But also, I was thinking earlier about all the cool stuff we might’ve missed this time round. Like, I know my uncommon drumsticks are awesome, but there must be something better than that. And then it came to me . . .’

‘What did?’ Granma Sylvie asked.

‘Cars, you guys! I can’t believe I’ve only just thought of it now! Uncommoners must drive amazing cars. I wonder if they trade spare parts – uncommon tyres and stuff.’

Ivy shook her head. ‘Is that what you’ve been thinking about? Driving an uncommon car?’

‘What’s wrong with that? I’ll be able to take lessons in a couple of years. Anyway, what’ve *you* been thinking about?’

Ivy laughed. She and Seb had faced death; they’d fought monsters and talking wolves, discovered a whole new branch of their family and used everyday objects to bend the laws of science. ‘I’ve been thinking how everything feels different now,’ she admitted. ‘We’re not muckers any more; we’re uncommoners. Haven’t you thought about how our lives will change?’

‘I dunno about that,’ Seb replied. ‘But one thing’s for sure: I’m never going to look at a toilet brush in the same way again.’

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About the Author

Londoner Jennifer Bell began working in children’s books as a specialist bookseller at Foyles – one of the world’s most famous bookshops – in Charing Cross Road. There she looked after the shop’s five not-so-deadly piranha fish as well as recommending children’s books to celebrities, royalty and even astronauts. After having the privilege of listening to children talk about their favourite books for many years, she started writing one of her own. Jennifer came up for the idea of *The Crooked Sixpence* while packing for a holiday and wishing she could just disappear inside her suitcase and be there already. The world of Lundinor is inspired by sayings from traditional English nursery rhymes as well as the stories Jennifer grew up with about the Cockney markets her grandparents used to visit.

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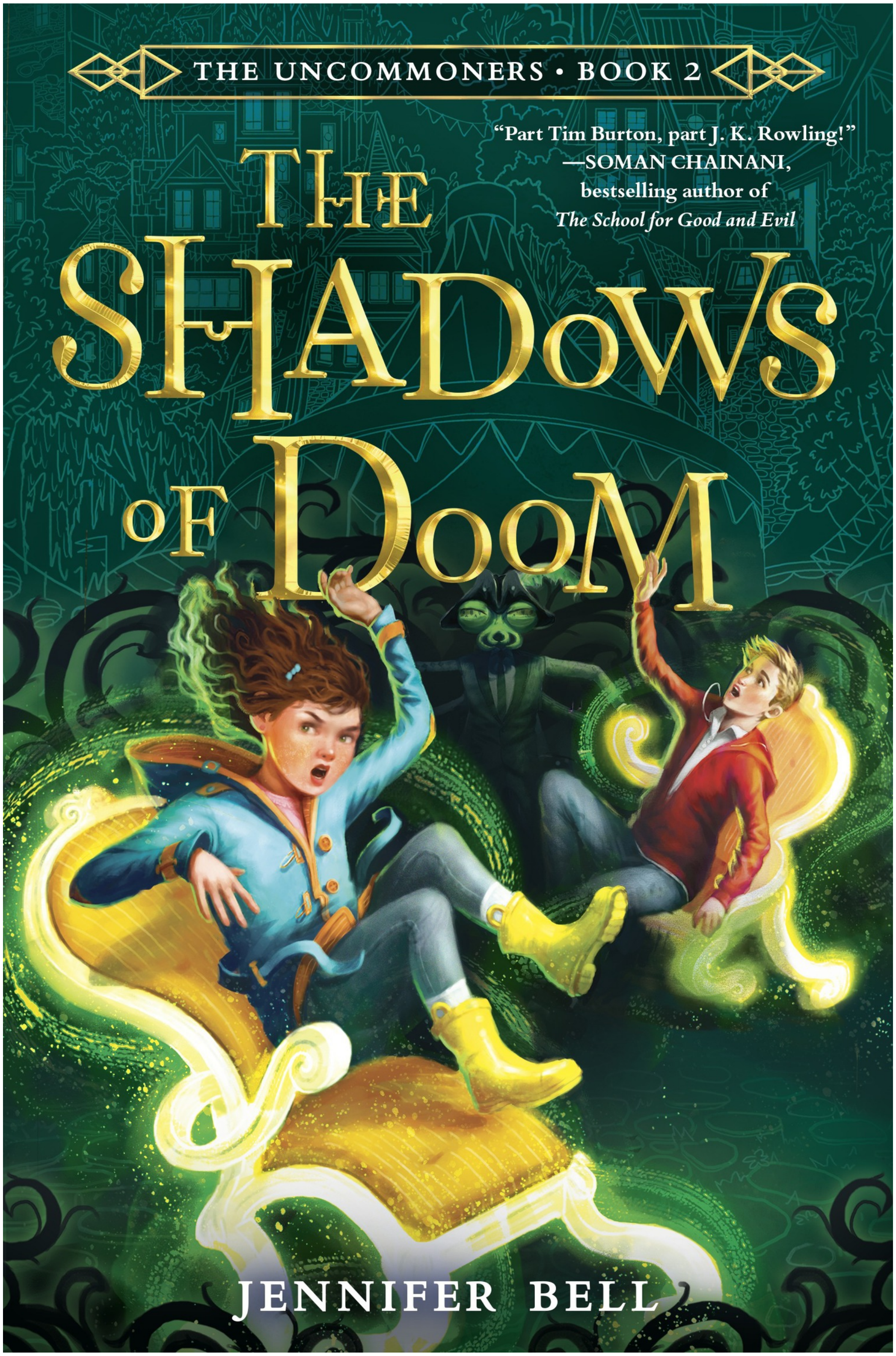

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The Uncommoners #1: The Crooked Sixpence

BOOK TWO

THE SHADOWS OF DOOM

THE UNCOMMONERS

BY JENNIFER BELL

ILLUSTRATED BY
KARL JAMES MOUNTFORD

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For Beks, Nichol and Tara.
Uncommon friends.

CHAPTER ONE

Ivy hurtled headfirst through the darkness. Her brown curls blew into her face as the bag walls flapped noisily around her. “Seb!” she shouted. “Are you still there?”

A crack of light appeared in the distance.

About time.

She slowed as the crack grew into an opening, and then squeezed her way out of the burlap bag, her body expanding back to normal size like a balloon filling with water.

She found herself in a small, lavishly furnished room. Moonlight streamed through a single porthole window, illuminating a polished oak desk, leather armchair and deep-pile rug. Leaning against one wall was a boy with pale skin, green eyes just like hers and messy blond hair.

“Seb, where are we?”

Her brother’s cheeks bulged. “Can’t speak…trying not to hurl.”

“We’re on a ship,” answered a shaky voice behind her. “And we’re not alone.”

Ivy turned to find their friend Valian with an expression of distress on his tan angled face. He was kneeling beside the body of a man wearing a black uniform. The man lay sprawled across the floor, one arm above his head, the other squashed under his side. He looked about the same age as Ivy and Seb’s parents—midforties—with a curly blond beard and a white streak of hair through his left eyebrow.

“Is he sleeping?” Ivy asked, crawling closer. The man’s eyes were closed. She nudged his shoulder, but he was unresponsive.

Valian lowered his ear to the man’s lips, and then felt his neck. “He’s not breathing.”

“We’ve got to help him!”

“I don’t think we can.” Valian lifted his fingers away, swallowing. “He hasn’t got a pulse.”

Ivy went still. “You mean…?”

“He’s dead,” Valian said somberly. “He’s still warm. It must’ve happened only recently.”

There was a loud bang as Seb bolted through a door, hand clamped over his mouth. Through the gap Ivy glimpsed a white marble bathroom. “Maybe he tripped over the rug and fell,” she suggested. As she stood up, the floor swayed. On a tray in the corner a set of whiskey glasses rattled.

Valian frowned. “I don’t think so; there’s no bump on his head and no blood from a wound.” He got to his feet and studied the cabin. Amidst the jeweled lamps and gilt mirrors, his straggly dark hair, slashed skinny jeans and muddy red basketball shoes looked completely out of place. “We need to find out what vessel we’re on.”

“There’s a badge on the man’s jacket,” Ivy observed. Beneath a logo were some words. *“Chief Officer,”* she read aloud. *“MV* Outlander.”

A toilet flushed and the door to the bathroom swung open. Seb wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his hoodie. “Sorry—I couldn’t hold it in any longer.”

Ivy crinkled her nose as he tramped into the center of the cabin and slipped his cell phone out of his jeans pocket. “Can you just do something helpful?” she asked. “You’re the one who made us rush into this whole thing without a proper plan.”

Seb glared down at her. “It’s an experiment—I was using my initiative. I didn’t know there’d be a dead person here.” He was broad-shouldered and tall, with the muscular arms of someone who—unfortunately for Ivy—did an hour’s drum practice every evening. She didn’t know how they were siblings; she was so slight.

Valian peered over Seb's shoulder. "Can that device tell you where we are?"

Ivy still found it odd that Valian knew next to nothing about common technology.

"Hmmm." Seb slid his finger across the phone a few times. "GPS is working, but I'm on a different network operator, so we must be somewhere outside the U.K." His eyes widened. "Whoa. By the looks of this, we're just off the coast of Norway!"

"Norway?" Valian grabbed the burlap bag that Ivy had just crawled out of and snatched at the paper luggage tag tied to the top. He read it twice. "I definitely wrote the label correctly—it says *Selena Grimes*—but what would she be up to in Norway?"

Seb jerked his head. "Er, parent-napping? Blackmail? Torture? The Dirge probably do bad-guy stuff all over the world."

A chill ran through Ivy's body. The Dirge was an organization that was so evil, just hearing their name left her cold. "We don't know for sure that she's here yet. The label might not have worked." Secretly she was hoping it hadn't. Selena Grimes was dangerous. The last time their paths had crossed, Ivy had almost been eaten by Selena's pet wolf. "Perhaps the bag can't take us directly to a person, only to a certain place, like all other uncommon bags?"

"This bag is *different,*" Valian insisted. "You know that. The Great Uncommon Good are the five most powerful uncommon objects in existence—I'm telling you, this thing is capable of more than we know."

Ivy considered the shabby old potato sack. It was strange to think that something so ordinary-looking had the power to transport you thousands of miles in only a few seconds. But that was the thing about all uncommon objects—even the most normal, everyday item could be hiding an extraordinary ability.

Seb squinted at the chief officer. "What's that in his hand?"

Ivy turned her attention back to the body. There was something glinting in the man's grasp. Grateful that she was wearing gloves, she gently pried his fingers apart to reveal a tiny silver coin. It was bent in the middle and there was writing around the edge.

"A crooked sixpence," she blurted, scrambling away. She'd recognize the coin anywhere—it was the Dirge's calling card.

"One of the Dirge murdered him," Valian said with a scowl. "The label on the bag *must* have worked; it's too much of a coincidence otherwise. Selena did this."

Seb cast a sidelong glance at the door that led out into the rest of the ship. "Selena must have left the cabin only moments before we arrived. Which means she's on board somewhere, possibly with other members of the Dirge." He grabbed the Great Uncommon Bag off the floor. "You were right; we didn't think this through. Let's get out of here."

Ivy was about to raise an alarm to warn the crew, when the bitter whiff of chemicals wafted into her face, making her blink. "Yuck—where's that smell coming from?"

Valian sniffed and turned his gaze to the crooked sixpence in the chief officer's hand. "Tongueweed," he growled. "I'd know the stench anywhere—the Dirge used it on my parents. It's a poison that makes you speak the truth right before you die. The coin's been coated in it; it must have penetrated the man's skin."

Guilt tugged at Ivy's heart as she thought of Valian's mum and dad. "We can't leave yet," she told Seb. "If we can find out why Selena killed this man and what she's doing here, it could help us understand what the Dirge are planning—and stop them."

"Ivy, it's too dangerous!" Seb protested. "Selena's already killed this guy; if she sees us here, she'll kill us too."

Ivy wanted to tell her brother that he should have thought of that before he started all this, but there wasn't time to argue. "We don't know how long Selena will be on board; we've got to take the opportunity now."

"I've got something that'll help us," Valian said. "I mean, with the not-being-seen part. Can you find the layout of this ship on your device, Seb? It's called the MV *Outlander*."

With a grunt of disapproval, Seb stuffed the Great Uncommon Bag inside his hoodie pocket and got out his phone. "MV *Outlander*—here we go. It's a cargo ship that sails between Norway and London. There's three levels plus the engine room, and a big crane on the deck where the containers are stored."

Ivy wondered why the Dirge would be interested in a common ship like the MV *Outlander*. "Let's go up on deck," she suggested. "We can examine the containers. Perhaps the cargo will give us clues as to why the Dirge are here."

"Good plan." Valian stuffed a hand inside his leather jacket and brought out a small crystal perfume bottle. It was fitted with an ornate brass atomizer and filled with a small measure of dark liquid. "A ship this big will be teeming with crew. We'll need to use this to keep ourselves hidden." He shook the bottle, checking that there was liquid left in the bottom.

"What *is* that stuff?" Ivy asked, drawing closer.

Valian aimed the brass nozzle at her head. "Technically it's just fountain water inside an uncommon perfume bottle, but most uncommoners call it liquid shadow. It enables the wearer to blend into any shadow they're touching. It won't make us totally invisible, but people tend to notice shadows a whole lot less than they notice actual humans."

Ivy sniffed as the dark liquid fell in droplets on the shoulders of her navy duffle coat and into her hair. It smelled a bit like smoke.

"We'll have an hour before it evaporates and the effect wears off," Valian warned, squirting the stuff over Seb before turning the spray on himself. "Let's go."

They shut the cabin door, leaving the chief officer's body where it lay. The passageway outside, with its curved metal walls covered in rivet heads and gray gloss paint, was like a futuristic tunnel. The unnatural lighting cast shadows everywhere. Ivy stepped into the first one she came upon.

"No way!" Seb whispered, staring right at her. "Ivy, you've disappeared."

She reached forward but couldn't see her hand. She examined her body. There was no skirt, bobbly wool tights or scuffed white sneakers to be seen. They seemed to have dissolved into the gloom. As an experiment, she extended her foot into the light, and a toe-shaped shadow appeared on the floor.

Valian signaled at them both to hurry up. “Come on.”

They hastened along the corridor toward the stairs. The hull interior was stark and cramped, and echoed with strange noises. Ivy tried not to dwell on the warning signs everywhere—*fire valve (main section), explosive hazard, life buoy, emergency door.*

She had only just grasped the handrail at the base of the stairwell when the stamp of heavy boots sounded overhead. Valian nosedived into the darkness under the steps, taking Ivy and Seb with him. Ivy flattened herself against the wall, breathing heavily, as a group of sailors in navy uniforms came clattering down.

Incredible. The liquid shadow had worked.

Crewmen shouted orders in another language as they hurried through a heavy door into the next passage. When they were out of sight, Ivy, Seb and Valian left the shadows and scuttled up the steps.

Outside, the night air was filled with the crash and rumble of the ocean. Ivy stood with her legs apart as the ship swayed, her skin prickling in the cold. A string of electric lights rattled in the wind, illuminating the giant metal containers spread out across the deck. They were arranged in rows, with space for people to pass between, but the place seemed eerily empty. Valian pointed to the top of a large crane standing in the middle of them, and they headed toward it.

As they moved into the shadows, Valian and Seb disappeared. Ivy knew they were there somewhere but, unable to see them, she felt alone.

The huge containers were painted in bright colors, with thick steel bars securing the doors and serial numbers stamped on the front. Ivy examined each one carefully as she passed, but there was no clue to what they might hold.

Creeping by a red container, she heard a loud clang and froze. It sounded like something was moving *inside* it. Ivy jumped back as two dark shapes came gliding *through* the corrugated wall. She clamped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from gasping. Only one kind of people could move through solid matter like that: *races of the dead.*

There wasn’t enough light to see the pair clearly, but one was very tall with an odd-shaped head, and the other wore a long hooded cloak trimmed with white fur. Checking that she still had the appearance of a shadow, Ivy kept still. The cloaked figure drifted into a patch of moonlight and slid back her hood. A glossy dark braid fell to her waist.

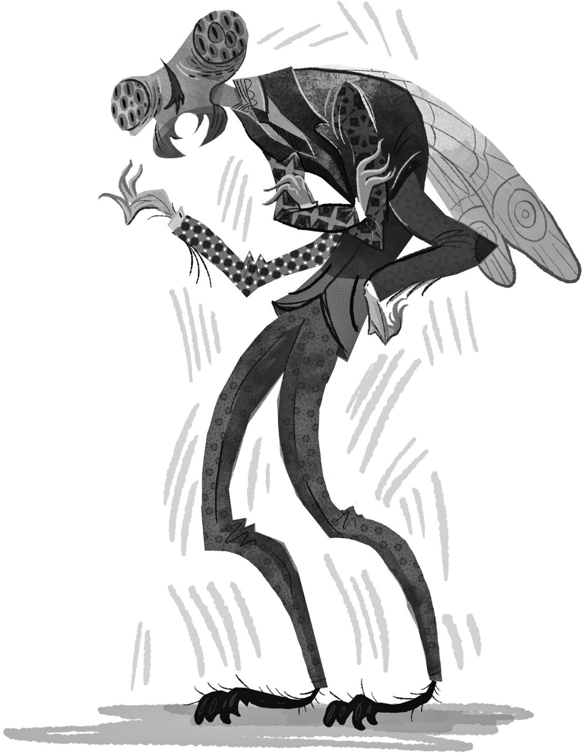
Selena Grimes.

Ivy flinched. The ghoul had the same movie-star good looks as she remembered: glowing skin, angular cheekbones and bright red lips. Selena's dark hair framed her delicate face, making her piercing blue eyes look all the more intense.

"Even with the tongueweed, that fool told us nothing," she snapped. Her steely voice made Ivy shudder. "I should've killed him sooner. Are you certain the Jar of Shadows is on board?"

"The tracing serum I have been using to track it is highly accurate," whistled Selena's companion. The voice sounded as if the owner was talking through a set of panpipes. "The jar is definitely on this ship; I would not have contacted you otherwise."

The speaker stepped out of the darkness. He looked like a human-sized praying mantis, with smooth green skin and a flat, triangular head mounted with two glowing yellow eyes the size of salad bowls. Sharp mandibles hung from his jaw, and Ivy counted a total of six stick-thin limbs protruding from his tailored emerald wool suit: two that he was using as legs; another four that were adapted into arms with thorny, clawed hands. The arches of silky green wings poked above his shoulder blades.



Ivy recoiled in horror. She wasn’t sure what race of the dead he was; he certainly wasn’t a ghoul like Selena.

“I will continue searching the cargo until the vessel docks,” he pledged. “The ship is scheduled to arrive in London in the early hours.”

“London?” Selena’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “But that’s perfect. Lundinor opens for spring Trade tomorrow; someone must be taking the jar there.” She smirked. “They have no idea that the object has Pandora’s power. Wait till the ship unloads, then hunt for the jar in Lundinor. And do it quickly.”

Mantis Man lowered his head. “As you wish, Wolfsbane.”

Ivy shivered. Wolfsbane was Selena’s code name. The other members of the Dirge—Ragwort, Blackclaw, Nightshade, Hemlock and Monkshood—were named after poisons too.

“And contact me again with any news,” Selena continued. “It is imperative that I get hold of the jar as soon as possible. There is no time to waste.” She removed one of her black satin gloves and examined her fingers. The skin on her hand was scabbed and rotting, oozing with yellow pus. Ivy looked away in disgust. “The Dirge’s age in the light is coming.” Selena flicked a maggot off her knuckles. “Soon it is the muckers who will understand what it’s like to live in darkness.”

Ivy wasn’t sure what Selena Grimes meant, but it couldn’t be good. *Mucker* came from the expression “common as muck.” It was the horrible slang term for commoners—people who, by blood, weren’t entitled to know anything about the uncommon world.

All of a sudden something hit her on the arm and she squeaked in shock. Seb was standing beside her, Valian a little way behind him. An angry hiss filled the air, making the hairs on the back of Ivy’s neck stand on end.

“Spies,” Mantis Man growled, his antennae clicking.

The liquid shadow had worn off.

Selena shouted, *“Get them!”*

With a great *whoosh*, Mantis Man extended his wings and rose into the air as Selena shot in Ivy’s direction.

Ivy ran, her feet hammering across the deck. Sprinting ahead, Valian turned down the next aisle. Ivy raced after him and almost collided with Seb.

“Keep going!” he cried, pumping his arms. “The bug guy is right behind us.”

They could hear the ominous beat of wings overhead. Seb snatched the Great Uncommon Bag out of his hoodie and whispered something into the opening.

“Throw it here,” Valian yelled.

Seb lobbed the bag, and Valian caught it in one hand before skidding to a halt by the ship’s rail. The sea beyond was black. “We have to jump,” he told them, panting. “Trust me.” Using one hand for support, he hurdled the bar and leaped over the edge.

Seb shoved Ivy forward. “Ivy—go!”

Scrambling up onto the rails, she snuck a look over her shoulder. Selena Grimes and Mantis Man were almost upon them. Inhaling a great lungful of air, she jumped into the waves.

Her limbs flailed. She spied the Great Uncommon Bag fluttering just out of reach, the heels of Valian’s red basketball shoes disappearing inside.

“I-veeeeeeee!” Seb called, falling behind her.

Wind screamed in her ears as she forced her arms down and aimed her head at the opening, diving into the bag.

CHAPTER TWO

Ivy adjusted the desk lamp to see the wound on Seb's forehead more clearly. The scratch wasn't very deep, but the skin around the edge was puckered and red. "That Mantis Man must have caught you in midair before you got inside the bag," she said, patting the graze with a damp cotton ball. "Do you think he's Selena's new henchman?"

Seb gripped the edge of the table, wincing. "Got to be; I didn't see her pet grim-wolf with her." His voice echoed up to the high ceiling of their dad's office at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The room was stuffed with more reading material than a small library: string-tied bundles of academic journals packed the windowsills and never-ending volumes of encyclopedias filled the shelves. In one corner an old microscope sat on a desk, and on a table in the center, a brass desk plate gleamed with the words EMMET SPARROW, RESEARCH DEPARTMENT.

"Make sure the wound's clean," Valian advised, standing guard by the door. The hallway beyond was dark. "I've never seen a race of the dead like that before, so I don't know if that guy had venomous skin or not."

Seb's face fell. "Sorry…venomous skin?"

Ivy stuck a Band-Aid over his wound, threw the used cotton ball into a wastepaper bin and closed the first-aid kit. As she returned the box to the window ledge, a lone black cab rumbled past on the puddled road outside. Only an hour and a half had passed since eleven p.m., when they'd left in the Great Uncommon Bag; London was quiet.

She sat down on her dad’s chair; his sweater was slung over the back. An image of the chief officer’s dead body crept into her mind and she pulled the sweater onto her lap and squeezed it tightly, wishing her dad was there.

Valian hurried away from the door. “Quick—get down!”

Light flickered out in the hallway. Seb rolled onto the floor and Ivy slid under the table as a flashlight beam illuminated the room. It moved slowly across the walls and then, after a few seconds, disappeared—along with the sound of fading footsteps.

“We can’t stay here,” Ivy whispered, wriggling back into the chair. “If a security guard sees us, we won’t be able to explain how we got in.”

Seb poked his head up. “The only reason I told the bag to bring us here is because Dad’s books might help us understand what Selena Grimes was saying. You know—about that *Jar of Shadows*.” He asked Valian, “Does the name mean anything to you?”

“No, but I’ve got an idea what it might be.” Valian’s expression darkened. “A name like the Jar of Shadows suggests it’s a one-of-a-kind object; and we already know five one-of-a-kind objects that the Dirge are interested in.”

A bead of sweat ran down Seb’s forehead as he pushed the tatty Great Uncommon Bag into the center of the table. “You mean, you think the Jar of Shadows is like this, one of the Great Uncommon Good?”

Ivy shifted in her seat. If the Dirge ever got hold of one of the Great Uncommon Good, everyone—uncommoner or not—would be in danger. “What do uncommon jars do?” she asked Valian.

“They store *fears*,” he told her with a tremble in his voice. “If you cry into an uncommon jar, your greatest fear leaves you and remains in the jar until it is opened again. Uncommoners use them as a way of dealing with phobias. The more powerful the jar, the greater the number of fears it can hold.”

“Right…so why would the Dirge want one?” Seb asked. “They don’t exactly seem the scared type.”

“Maybe not,” Valian replied. “But I once saw a commoner break a jar by accident. It must have contained a fear of falling because after it shattered, a gigantic chasm appeared in the ground and the man dropped right into it.”

Ivy had a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach. “So you’re saying that maybe the Dirge don’t want to *store* a fear at all; they want to *release* one….” She drummed her fingers on the table. “Maybe not *just* one…If the Jar of Shadows really *is* one of the Great Uncommon Good, there must be a huge number of fears inside it. Didn’t Selena say something about the jar having *Pandora’s power*?”

“Yeah, but I’ve only heard of one Pandora before,” Seb said, “and she had a *box*.”

Ivy vaguely recalled her dad telling her the story of Pandora; it was from Greek mythology. She scanned the bookshelves until she spotted a volume titled *The Greek Myths*. Opening the book on the table, she skimmed the contents before turning to the right chapter. “Here we go—Zeus created the first woman on Earth and named her Pandora. He gave her a box that, when she opened it, released all evil into the world.”

“Great gift, Zeus,” Seb muttered drily. “Does it mention anything about Pandora’s power?”

As Ivy read ahead, a cold sensation swept over her. “No, but according to this, over thousands of years the myth has been mistranslated. In the original story, Pandora isn’t given a box at all….” Her hand started to shake. She looked up at Seb and Valian. “She’s given a *jar*. The Jar of Shadows and Pandora’s box are the same thing!” She traced her finger across the text. “When Pandora opened the jar, it released *sickness that brings death to men and myriad other pains*.”

Seb smiled thinly. “Fun times, then.”

“Sounds like the Jar of Shadows contains all the fears of the world,” Valian said. “We’ve got to stop the Dirge from getting hold of it.”

“Great,” Seb huffed. “It’s just our luck that we’re heading back to Lundinor at the same time as the jar. What’s the plan?”

The name *Lundinor* drifted through Ivy’s head like a secret password. It felt like only yesterday that she and Seb were wandering the cobbled streets of the gigantic underground market, staring wide-eyed at all the uncommon objects for sale. “Valian, shall we meet you there?”

He nodded. “I’ll see what I can discover beforehand. If I can find out who is importing the jar, we can narrow our search in Lundinor. There can’t be many traders that use the MV *Outlander*. I’ll take the Great Uncommon Bag to the Scouts’ Union in Edinburgh—it’s where scouts from all over the U.K. meet; it’ll be the best place to find out. In the meantime, make sure you keep out of Selena’s way.”

Ivy could feel the cold hands of danger on her shoulders. “I wonder why she hasn’t followed us here already.”

“Too much of a risk,” Valian said with certainty. “Seb, you remember what you told me a few days ago?”

For the past few months, while they’d been at school, Seb and Ivy had been communicating with Valian using uncommon feathers.

“What, that the Ripz have just released their new album?”

Valian’s expression went blank. “No. The other thing—about seeing an underguard on the way to school.”

“Oh.” Seb smiled awkwardly. “Yeah—I thought it looked like an underguard uniform. I tried to follow him, but he disappeared.”

Ivy had seen one too. Or so she thought. If underguards showed up in the common world, it was usually bad news.

“Well, since you left Lundinor last winter, I think the underguards have been monitoring you,” Valian explained. “It makes sense that they’d want to check up on you, what with your family history…No offense.”

Seb sighed. “None taken. Our great-grandfather was in the Dirge; we can’t ignore it.”

“*And* our great-uncle,” Ivy added in a small voice. She wished they *could* ignore it or, even better, that it wasn’t true. Living with the knowledge that Blackclaw and Ragwort were her relatives was so painful.

“Thing is,” Valian continued, “Selena won’t risk coming after you herself, not with the underguard likely to spot her and ask questions.”

“So what do we do when we get to Lundinor?” Seb asked. “I mean, apart from trying not to be killed by Selena Grimes and her giant bug servant.”

“Keep your eyes open,” Valian replied, “and listen for anything that might be useful. We need to locate that jar.”

“If we find it, we can’t destroy it,” Ivy told them. “That’ll just release the fears inside. We’ll have to think of something else.”

“Great,” Seb moaned. “Low chance of success, high risk of mortal danger. What’s not to love about this plan?”

“There’s one small trip I need to make first,” Valian said, his dark eyes shining. “Now that we know that the bag can take us to an actual person, I figured…”

Rosie, Ivy thought. Valian was going to see whether the bag could find his missing little sister in the same way it had found Selena Grimes. “Good luck,” she offered with a hopeful smile.

“Thanks.” Valian pulled a few short brown feathers out of his jacket pocket. “Here—take some of these in case you need to contact me. When you get to Lundinor, keep to the busy areas and don’t go anywhere on your own. Selena will be waiting for you to slip up. Don’t give her a chance.”

CHAPTER THREE

"Are you sure about this, Granma?" Seb asked, tugging on the straps of his rucksack. "It doesn't look like there'd be an entrance to Lundinor hidden around here."

Ivy peered up and down the quiet residential street that Granma Sylvie had led them to, only a ten-minute train ride from their London home. It seemed totally ordinary: a row of brick houses with gravel driveways and, on the opposite side, a long wooden fence. As there were no buildings peeping over the top, Ivy assumed that this backed onto railway tracks or undeveloped land.

Granma Sylvie's heels clicked along the pavement. "I agree it seems unlikely." Her long silvery hair had been swept back into a neat bun and she was wearing a fitted velvet jacket and wide-leg palazzo trousers. She looked smarter than usual, as if she was on her way to a job interview. "However, I asked Ethel to repeat the instructions three times and we're definitely in the right place. There should be a gate farther along."

Hearing that Ethel Dread had been involved, Ivy felt more at ease. Granma Sylvie's long-lost best friend was the proprietor of the House of Bells in Lundinor, and more steely-eyed and streetwise than any other trader Ivy had met. "Did Ethel say why we're not using bag travel like last time?"

Granma Sylvie stiffened. "Apparently there are restrictions on gaining access to Lundinor this season. You need a special permit to travel via uncommon bag; otherwise you have to pass through an entrance like this."

Restrictions…? Ivy studied her granma's expression to see if she knew more than she was letting on, but Granma Sylvie's hard mouth and twitchy eyes only showed that she was nervous. Ivy didn't blame her. Returning to Lundinor in the shadow of their dark family history would never be easy.

Granma Sylvie stopped by an unlocked gate in the fence. "This must be the one." She inched the gate open and the three of them slipped through. On the other side was a huge overgrown field of gardens, dewy and flattened after last night's rain. Plots of freshly turned earth sat alongside beds of bushy green cauliflowers and red cabbages. Wild bluebells swayed among the weeds at its edge.

Seb dodged an overturned plant pot. "Maybe the entrance is disguised to stop commoners from discovering it."

Ivy rubbed her nose—the air stank of compost, making it twitch. She searched into the distance. There were a few people tending to plants or digging soil, but the place seemed very quiet. "Either that or underguards are continuously stripping commoners' memories to make them forget what they've seen," she suggested. She had an unpleasant flashback of her parents having their minds wiped by uncommon whistles, and shook her head clear. Thank goodness they were on holiday this week, celebrating their wedding anniversary. At least they'd be safe.

"Why *have* the underguard summoned you back, anyway?" Seb asked Granma Sylvie.

She squared her shoulders. "It appears that as I'm the only member of the Wrench family known to be alive, I have inherited the entire family estate. The underguard told me I must be present while they catalog everything, before I can formally claim it."

"Sounds boring," he commented, flashing Ivy a sidelong glance. "Will we get to see you much while we're there, or will you be too busy sorting that out?"

Granma Sylvie adjusted her handbag shakily. "I don't know. I haven't met any of these…*underguards*, but the tone of their communications hasn’t exactly been friendly. Can either of you see this entrance? Ethel said we’d spot it easily.”

As they tramped farther in, Ivy searched for anything that might be out of place, but the gardens seemed quite ordinary.

“I must have known about this entrance when I was younger,” Granma Sylvie said. “I’m sure Ethel feels strange having to explain it all to me again; thank goodness I have her to help.”

“We’re still learning too,” Ivy said, offering her a sympathetic smile.

Granma Sylvie ran a hand through Ivy’s messy hair. “I know. It would just be a whole lot less frustrating if my memories returned in one go. Instead, moments of my old life trickle back without warning.”

Ivy studied her closely. “Have you had any other memories return?”

Granma Sylvie’s expression darkened. For a second Ivy thought she wasn’t going to say anything, but eventually she sighed and admitted, “Something came back to me a few days ago….It’s complicated.”

Ivy shot Seb a nervous look. The last time Granma Sylvie remembered something from her time in Lundinor, it had proved to be so significant, it had helped Ivy and Seb to rescue their parents.

“The details are still hazy,” Granma Sylvie continued, “but I recall a large black door. I’m not quite sure where it is, or what’s around it, but it felt very familiar, as if I’d seen it many, many times.”

*A door…*Ivy ran through the possibilities in her head. Lundinor was the size of a city; this door could be anywhere.

“Painted across the front of the door was a symbol.” Granma Sylvie rummaged through her handbag for a notepad and pen, scribbled something down and held it up. “There. It’s like a figure eight, with a flat base and a flat top.”

Ivy considered the drawing carefully. “Like an hourglass.” Her mum used a timer that shape when boiling eggs.

“I thought so too,” Granma Sylvie agreed. “But there was something really odd about the symbol; it appeared to be *smoking*—as if it had been drawn on with acid that was burning through the door.” Her voice hardened. “And when the door opened, Selena Grimes was standing on the other side.”

"Do you have any idea what it means?" Seb asked. "What Selena's doing there?"

Granma Sylvie fiddled nervously with the scrap of paper. "Something to do with the Dirge, maybe. We know my father was a member; I suppose I can't dismiss the possibility that I too was involved somehow."

Ivy's eyes widened as she heard the doubt in Granma Sylvie's voice. There was no way *she* had ever been complicit in her father's horrific crimes!

A black door. A smoking hourglass. If Ivy could find out how they were connected to Selena Grimes, she might be able to put her granma's mind at rest *and* learn more about their enemy. They had to try everything to stop Selena from finding the Jar of Shadows.

"Why do you think it's come back to you now?" Seb questioned.

"The night before the memory returned I received a featherlight from the underguard, summoning me back to Lundinor," Granma Sylvie replied. "When I woke the next morning, that black door was in my head."

Seb took the piece of paper from her to examine the hourglass symbol. "Do you think Valian'll recognize this?"

"I've got a better idea." Ivy opened her satchel and pulled out a stainless-steel bicycle bell. There was a deep groove cut into the top, as if it had been damaged in a nasty cycling accident. She smiled as she flicked the lever on its side.

"Mornings to Ivy!" the bell declared in a ting-a-ling voice. It sounded high-pitched and breathless, like an excited child.

"Scratch!" Ivy hugged him close. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Scratch was an uncommon bell and not her best friend. "Do you know anything about a black door painted with a smoking hourglass?" She didn't add a question about the Jar of Shadows; Scratch had been with her on the MV *Outlander*—if he knew something, he would have said.

Scratch trilled. "If the black door smokings, know hourglass not," he told her sadly. "But Lundinor to be goings and there are of investigations. Askings you can at the Timbermeal."

Seb raised his hands. "All right, Yoda. Slow down. What's the *Timbermeal*?"

Ivy patted Scratch sympathetically. Like all other uncommon bells, he could speak, but the damage to his surface caused him to talk in a strange order—“back to fronted,” he called it.

“Always what is with a *Yoda*?” Scratch asked, frustrated.

Seb smirked and shook his head. “Scratch, when we get back from Lundinor I’ll tell you all about Yoda—promise.”

Granma Sylvie put a finger to her lips. “You know, Ethel mentioned this *Timbermeal*. It’s some sort of traditional celebration at the opening of spring Trade. All uncommoners have to attend at one time during the day.”

All uncommoners…

Ivy thought of Selena Grimes. If everyone was going to be at the Timbermeal, it could provide an opportunity to spy on her; she might lead them to the Jar of Shadows or the black door. Whispering thank you to Scratch, she stashed him back in her satchel and fastened it tight. “Have you talked to Ethel about what this new memory could mean?”

Granma Sylvie sighed as she stuffed the hourglass drawing into her jacket pocket. “Not yet. We’re still getting to know each other; I don’t want to worry her.”

Ivy didn’t press it any further. She guessed it must be a tricky situation for them both: Ethel’s best friend had returned after more than forty years, only to have no memory of their friendship.

Granma Sylvie came to a halt by a trellis covered in sweet peas. Ivy peered around it and saw a small orange potting shed. The shed itself looked ordinary, but the long line of people waiting outside didn’t. A muscular man in frilly breeches and samurai armor stood in front of a scrawny boy in a cravat and Hawaiian shorts. Behind them were a couple of women in gold-edged pink saris, narrow-cut trousers and espadrilles. Ivy counted one firefighter’s uniform, four pom-pom hats, two pairs of intricately embroidered lederhosen and at least three clown outfits on display.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner,” Seb said drily. “There’s only one kind of people who dress like that.”

“Uncommoners,” Ivy breathed.

The door to the potting shed swung open and, as the three of them watched, a blond lady in a yellow beret, chef's jacket and tennis skirt strutted in, and shut the door behind her. There was a series of loud noises—a rattle, some shouting and what sounded like a small explosion—and then the door reopened and the next person in line went in.

Granma Sylvie, Ivy and Seb looked at one another nervously as they shuffled to the end of the line. The other traders, who were chatting quietly among themselves, took no notice.

"I guess I'd better put these on now," Granma Sylvie said, withdrawing a pair of long lace gloves from her handbag as they reached the front of the line. *"Like all uncommoners, you must wear your uncommon gloves inside the Great Gates of Lundinor,"* she recited in a tight voice. "Officer Smokehart sent me six featherlights this week explaining the rules of GUT law. He thinks I'm either a criminal or an idiot!"

Ivy grimaced. If any single member of the underguard had it in for their family, it was Smokehart. After a moment's thought she took out the short white dress gloves folded inside her satchel.

As she pulled them on, she admired the neat pin-tuck creases ironed into the knuckles. She wasn't quite sure how to be an uncommoner just yet, but at least the gloves made her feel more like one on the outside. Seb hadn't yet "taken the glove," as it was called. He was old enough, but he still needed the permission of a quartermaster. On their last visit she had seen children in Lundinor without gloves; at least Seb wasn't the only one.

"If you wear those gloves the whole time we're in Lundinor, won't your whispering abilities drive you crazy?" he asked.

Ivy flexed her gloved fingers and felt a familiar prickly heat spread through her skin. She had the same reaction when she touched any uncommon object. She was a *whisperer*—a person with the rare gift to sense the very thing that made uncommon objects special: the sliver of human soul trapped inside them. "I thought so too at first," she told him, "but the warm sensation will fade in a minute or so. I've tested the gloves before."

She raised one glove to her ear and listened for the sounds coming from inside. The voices of trapped souls were too indistinct for her to hear what they were actually saying, but she could normally sense their presence.

"You all right?" Seb asked, watching her.

Ivy pursed her lips. Her capabilities had been changing recently…."Can you hold these for a sec?" She took off her gloves and handed them over, then closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the noises around her—the drone of insects whizzing through the gardens, the twitter of birds in the bordering trees, the rumble of distant traffic…

But at the very edge of her hearing she could discern something else: a shrill voice, like a marble rattling around in a jar. Ivy focused on it carefully. It was coming from the fragment of soul trapped inside the gloves.

She opened her eyes. "That settles it," she decided, taking the gloves back. "There's definitely something new going on with my whispering. Normally I have to be touching an uncommon object to hear the noises inside it, but recently I've been able to hear them without having any contact at all."

Seb's brow furrowed. "Could it be getting stronger?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's someone in Lundinor I can ask." It would be risky. Whispering was a dangerous gift, especially now that the Dirge had returned: in the past they had kidnapped people like her and made them sort through mountains of rubbish, searching for uncommon objects.

The potting shed door sprang open with a crash. Granma Sylvie flinched. "We're next."

A man in polished boots and a black uniform was standing to attention inside. He wore a purple visor, and there were silver braid epaulettes on his shoulders; on the lapels of his dark jacket were embroidered the letters *SB.*

Special Branch. These were members of the underguard whose job it was to prevent commoners from discovering the existence of the uncommon world.

The underguard took one look at Ivy and sniffed. “Gloved traders must shake my hand.”

Ivy blinked. She hadn’t expected to have to use her gloves so soon. Seb twiddled his bare thumbs while she and Granma Sylvie obliged. The underguard had such a firm grip, Ivy considered whether he might be a race of the dead. Some looked so much like the living.

“Very well,” he announced. “You may take a sack each.”

A sack? Ivy cast her eyes around the shed. In the corner lay a pile of plastic garden-waste sacks, and at least ten green hoses were looped over hooks on the wall. As she headed toward the pile, something stopped her in her tracks. Pinned to the back of the shed door was a poster:

WANTED

—JACK-IN-THE-GREEN—

Uncommon assassin (dead: a gobble) guilty of murder on six continents.

Master of disguise. **Extremely dangerous.**

Reward for information as to his whereabouts: objects to the value of **1,000 grade**

An artist’s drawing showed a tall creature with a hard green body, huge yellow eyes and razor-sharp clawed hands.

Selena’s henchman. Not all the details in the drawing were accurate—but it was definitely the same person. Ivy had never heard of a gobble before. She went cold.

Seb tripped as he caught sight of the drawing. “Ah—who is…? I mean, what’s that doing there?”

“Just a precaution.” The underguard sounded like he’d had to explain the poster more than once already that morning. “There have been several recent sightings of Jack-in-the-Green in other undermarts. We’re on high alert to prevent him from entering Lundinor. That’s why it’s important you attend the Timbermeal as soon as you arrive. We need to register you there too.”

*Jack-in-the-Green…*That explained the restrictions, then.

Granma Sylvie held a hand to her chest. “I’m sorry—high alert?” She stepped closer to the poster, reading it in more detail.

Ivy tried to think quickly. They couldn’t give Granma Sylvie the chance to reconsider—she and Seb *had* to go to Lundinor to find the Jar of Shadows.

“I don’t have all day,” the underguard said, nodding toward the pile. “Sack. Now.”

Ivy hastily bent down and picked up a sack. She half expected it to be uncommon, but when it grazed her arm, her skin remained cool.

The underguard went over to one of the hoses and began to pull it loose. The shed trembled as a rattling sound filled the air. Ivy soon understood why: there weren’t several hoses hanging up; there was just one *very, very long* hose.

As the underguard tugged it down, the rubber uncoiled like a huge snake dragging its belly around every hook on the walls.

“Stand back,” the man warned, pulling down his visor. He pointed the end of the hose toward the wooden floor and bent his knees, bracing himself. With a tiny click, he twisted the nozzle at the end—

The hose shot through the shed floor like a bullet, splintering the wood with a startlingly loud crack and burying itself deep in the earth. Ivy steadied herself against the wall as more and more of the hose disappeared underground. After a few moments the Special Branch underguard got out a penknife and leaped onto the remaining coil, wrestling with it till he was able to slice through it. The severed end flew out of his hand, stretched to the size of a toy hula hoop and lay down on the floor, forming the entrance to a dark hole.

“Off you go, then,” the underguard said, pushing up his visor and wiping his brow. “Put the sack down first before you get inside.”

Granma Sylvie stared first at the hole and then back at the WANTED poster. Seb looked confused.

“Come on, keep it moving,” the underguard groaned, putting away his penknife. “For security reasons, the hose will disappear once the three of you are down.”

Ivy studied the dark circle in the floor. It looked a bit like the entrance to a waterslide.

I wonder…

She ventured forward, swinging her satchel around to her back. “I’ll go first,” she said. If Seb wasn’t going to volunteer, then it was up to her.

“Ivy, be careful,” Granma Sylvie warned, stumbling forward. “I’m not sure if…”

Ivy laid her sack on the edge of the dark hole and tucked her legs inside. “I’ll be fine,” she said in as confident a voice as she could muster. “I’ll see you at the other end.”

It’s just a slide, she told herself. *I used to love slides when I was little.*

She looked over her shoulder and gave Seb and Granma Sylvie a wobbly smile before pushing off with her hands. She slipped forward, the sack gliding easily over the rubber, and then plunged into darkness.

“Whooooooa!” The hose spiraled left and right, throwing Ivy’s body from side to side. She fumbled for the edge of the sack, desperately trying to keep her balance. The air hummed as she slid faster and faster.

The wind forced tears from her eyes as a smile broke across her face. She hadn’t felt this exhilarated since the time she’d used an uncommon belt to fly up an old elevator shaft.

Soon, there was a glow of light ahead of her, and a rumble of voices grew louder—until the rubber walls fell away and Ivy found herself gliding down a polished wooden slide that spiraled around a white tower. Below her, she recognized the main arrivals chamber in Lundinor, with its toppling stacks of luggage and busy unloading areas. She got a warm feeling inside as she spied the details from her last visit: the ceiling dripping with glittering stalactites, the traders buzzing with a thousand different conversations as they arrived from all over the world.

She slowed as she reached the bottom of the slide, where another underguard from Special Branch was waiting to collect her sack. She hit the ground with a dull thud, her bottom taking most of the impact, then struggled to her feet.

“Hurry up,” the man said. “The next one’ll be along soon.”

Ivy staggered forward, trying to get her bearings. Those last few turns had left her feeling dizzy. She turned to study the slide. The white tower she had descended was shaped like an upside-down ice cream cone and painted with red stripes like a lighthouse. Ivy thought she'd seen something like it at the end of Brighton Pier—an old-fashioned fairground ride called a helter skelter.

Odd. She could swear it hadn't been in the arrivals chamber before.

She scanned the crowd. Traders greeted one another while smoothing lapels, fluffing out skirts and adjusting hats, making sure their Hobsmatch was looking its best. Dark patches of underguard uniform were dotted around like blackspot on a rosebush. Ivy assumed they were checking for Jack-in-the-Green.

In the distance, she recognized the Great Gates that marked the entrance to Lundinor. Their hinges were mounted into two stone figures who represented the founding traders of Lundinor—Lady Citron, a woman with a wide-skirted dress patterned with lemons, and Sir Clement, a stately gentleman wearing a garland of oranges around his neck.

Ivy squinted at the statue of Sir Clement. Before, she had been able to see his face clearly, but now a series of tiny dark cracks ran over it. She looked at his hand, which rested on a cane covered with…

Hang on.

Ivy rubbed her eyes, worried she was seeing things.

They're not cracks.

The statue was now covered by a climbing plant. Thick, glossy green leaves sprouted off the branches as they looped their way around Sir Clement's body.

Ivy didn't understand how it was possible. She'd never seen any plants in Lundinor before; it was underground—there was no sunlight for anything to grow. Her eyes followed the plant as it coiled down Sir Clement's cane and crawled over his feet and along the stone floor into the tunnel between the Great Gates.

Oh my…

A dazzlingly green lawn spread across the tunnel floor, and the walls and ceiling were almost obscured by branches that were heavy with purple blossoms. Ivy’s jaw dropped. The last time she had seen the tunnel it had been dusty and bare.

Spring had come to Lundinor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ivy clutched her satchel to her chest as she squeezed through the crowd. The heat was stifling, and the roar of conversation made it hard to hear Seb and Granma Sylvie behind her.

“ ’Scuse me, ladies and gents, coming through!” called a voice.

Ivy turned. A man wearing a bicycle helmet, flowery board shorts and a red kimono was maneuvering his way toward her, holding one arm above his head. “Can’t let go of these or chaos will break loose.”

When Ivy looked up, she saw a cluster of transparent balloons bobbing from the ribbons in his hand. Inside each one was a swirling rainbow-colored gas. She spotted a price tag hanging from one of the necks: *2.2 grade*. They couldn’t be that powerful, then. The scale for uncommon objects went up to ten, and Ivy knew there were only five objects with that value: the Great Uncommon Good. She tingled to think that she had used one of them—the Great Uncommon Bag.

Granma Sylvie gave the balloon trader a wary look and leaned closer to Ivy’s ear. “Was it this busy last time?”

“No, but Seb and I weren’t here on the first day of Trade before.” Ivy shuffled forward. Even for someone as small as her, it was difficult to move.

“This might be rush hour in the Great Cavern,” Seb suggested from behind. “We should head for the Market Cross; there’s always loads of space there.”

Ivy lifted an eyebrow. *Sometimes* her brother actually had good ideas. The Market Cross was the meeting point of the four main roads through Lundinor, each one leading to a particular quarter of the undermart. On her last visit, Ivy had seen the East End and the Great Cavern; the West End and the Dead End she had yet to explore, though she knew that each quarter was very different.

She stepped up onto a crate beside the road and peered out at the river of people trudging down the Gauntlet, the main road through the Great Cavern. It was busy, as usual, with traders frantically unpacking goods and setting up shop, ready for the start of Trade at midday…but it looked nothing like the Lundinor that Ivy remembered.

Smart gray-brick houses and shadowy cobbled streets had been replaced by lush green fields scattered with crocuses, tents and wooden stalls. The Gauntlet—now a muddy, tree-lined avenue—was flanked by thatched-cottage shops with picket fences and antique vans selling fast food. Everywhere Ivy turned she saw bobbing lanterns and colored flags waving to get her attention. It was like they'd walked into a massive underground festival. The air even smelled of a combination of fried onions and freshly cut grass.

"I don't understand how they've made it so sunny when we're miles underground," Granma Sylvie said as Ivy stepped down.

"Beach towels," Seb said, pointing above his head. "See?"

During their last visit the cave ceiling had been veiled in shadow. Now a canopy of neon-colored towels were suspended between the jagged brown stalactites, glittering like scales on the belly of a fish. Each one radiated light.

As they plodded on, Ivy eyed the various objects cradled in people's arms or poking from the tops of their carts and bags. The Jar of Shadows could easily be among them.

She spied with interest several handwritten signs hanging in shop windows:

Entry by Appointment Only

THIS SHOP IS GUARDED AT NIGHT

Ivy had no recollection of seeing anything like that before. She studied the nearby stalls and carts. The phrase *Beware: this vendor station is alarmed* appeared on several chalkboards.

“Seems a bit less friendly than last time,” Seb commented. “Like everyone’s nervous about something.”

Ivy tuned in to the buzz of gossip, hoping it might reveal more.

“Four grade ’e’s trying to flog ’em for! Good luck. I know a lot of folks ’oo won’t even be coming this season.”

“Come on, quick! The Timbermeal will ’ave started by now.”

“I ’eard it almost got canceled. You know, because of Jack-in-the-Green. If ’e’s been seen, it can only mean one thing.”

Ivy only caught fragments of conversation, but the trader’s mention of Jack-in-the-Green made her shiver.

At the Market Cross, the stone courtyard had been transformed into a vast village green, complete with bandstand. An area in the center of the grass was sectioned off by a wicker fence, and a group of underguards with tricorne hats were stationed outside, checking off the names of those lining up to get in.

“Alexander!” a voice boomed.

Ivy stumbled aside as a burly, broad-chested man with a thick beard plodded past her.

“Slow down or you’ll make fools of us both.” There was an American twang in the man’s deep voice. “I don’t see anyone else here running. Do you?”

A skinny boy in smart gray trousers, antique leather gym shoes and a colorful tasseled waistcoat was hurrying ahead of him. They both had the same fiery orange hair.

“Sorry, Pa,” the boy said with a similar accent, slowing immediately.

“You *will* be sorry if you ruin this for us,” the man warned, yanking on the sleeve of his son’s shirt. “One look at you and everyone here will think we don’t do things properly where we come from.”

Poor kid. Ivy watched as the man lumbered into a line, dragging his somber-faced son behind him.

“That must be the Timbermeal,” Seb said.

Ivy felt Scratch whirring excitedly in her satchel.

“We’d better get it over with,” Granma Sylvie decided nervously. “Stay close to me.”

As they headed over, Ivy heard music coming from the bandstand. An underguard with a toilet brush in his belt stopped them on their way in.

“Name?” he asked, making a note in the air with a feather.

Granma Sylvie hesitated. “Sparrow.”

The officer paused, making a second assessment of Ivy and Seb. “I see.”

“We’re Sparrows too,” Ivy said.

The officer’s mouth twitched. “Oh, I know who you two are.”

Ivy pursed her lips and tried her best not to scowl. Perhaps the officer had been one of those assigned to monitor her and Seb over the past few months.

The guard allowed them through and Ivy saw that, beyond the fence, a gigantic tea party was taking place. Traders in elaborate Hobsmatch sat at circular white tables, each seating four or five on a range of different chairs. She spied a moth-eaten armchair, an executive leather recliner, a wooden milk stool and a striped deck chair, among others. Gleaming silver trays of finger food surrounded the centerpiece of each table: a wooden sculpture of either Sir Clement or Lady Citron.

Ivy noticed Granma Sylvie tapping her fingers against her hip as they navigated their way between the tables, trying to find a seat.

Seb lowered his mouth to her ear. “That Jack-in-the-Green guy could be here already, looking for the jar.”

Ivy had to hope that the heightened security had slowed down Jack-in-the-Green a little. They needed all the help they could get if they were going to find that jar before he did.

In the distance, at the edge of the green, she spotted a familiar face. “Ethel’s over there, Granma.”

Ethel Dread was sitting on a velvet chaise longue beside Violet Eyelet, a button trader, and Mr. Littlefair, the innkeeper of the Cabbage

Moon, who was perched on a barstool.

“ ’Ere, quick—nab a seat before they go,” Ethel told them when they were close enough. She was wearing her normal outfit—well, normal for Hobsmatch: long dark pilot’s overalls, fingerless gloves and a brightly colored silk headscarf, under which sprouted tufts of spiky black hair.

“Delighted to have you staying at the Cabbage Moon again,” Mr. Littlefair said with a cheery smile. “Your things arrived yesterday via bag travel.”

Ivy beamed at him. It was good to see them all again. She took a plastic egg-shaped chair; Seb plonked himself down on a metal patio seat beside her. Ivy noticed a price tag hanging from the arm. It had been stamped with the logo of a shop, François Filigree’s Furniture Jamboree.

“Well”—Violet nudged her thick spectacles higher on her nose—“I must say, it’s lovely to see you two again.” Her lenses were foggy. As always, Ivy doubted whether she could see them at all. “And good to find *you* safe and well too,” Violet added, reaching for Granma Sylvie’s hand. “It’s been a long time.”

Granma Sylvie gave a forced smile. “Very long.” She sat with her back ruler-straight, her hands cupping her knees, as if she was under inspection. Ivy wondered if that was how it felt to meet friends you didn’t remember.

“I only wish it was under better circumstances,” Ethel said, pursing her lips. “News that Jack-in-the-Green ’as been sighted ’as sent shockwaves through Lundinor. Nasty piece of work, ’e is.”

“What do you know about him?” Ivy tried to sound casual. “Has he been in Lundinor before?”

Ethel folded her arms. “ ’E used to work for the Dirge; and since Ragwort’s arrest last season, their name’s on everyone’s lips. People ’ave started to believe they’ll return.” She lowered her voice. “A possibility the six of us know is all too real.”

“Is it a surprise everyone’s terrified?” Violet asked. “These Fallen Guild rumors have got people spooked.” She looked over her shoulder at a table of dead diners. “If you’ll pardon the expression in present company.”

Ivy could understand the traders’ paranoia. For all they knew, there were four Dirge members still unaccounted for—Nightshade, Blackclaw, Hemlock *and* Wolfsbane. And they could be anyone—your friend, your neighbor, your employer…No wonder people were suspicious of one another.

“Apparently Selena Grimes ’as issued the underguard with a new set of powers to combat the Dirge.” Ethel snorted.

“I wish you wouldn’t use that word so much,” Violet said, looking around. “Can’t you just say Fallen Guild, like everyone else?” She pushed her glasses back up her nose with a shudder.

Ivy appreciated why people preferred not to use *Dirge:* the word seemed to turn the air cold whenever anyone said it.

“Let’s not think about all that just now.” Ethel glanced sympathetically at Granma Sylvie, who was shifting in her seat. “Why don’t we ’ave a toast, eh?” She raised her glass toward Ivy, Seb and Granma Sylvie, who each grabbed one of their own. Violet and Mr. Littlefair copied her. “To friends old and new!”

After they’d taken a sip, Ethel nodded at Ivy and Seb. “Bet you two’ve been lookin’ forward to getting to know Lundinor more this season. You must be itching to go off and explore.”

Ivy gave Seb a meaningful look. They needed to begin their search for the Jar of Shadows as soon as possible.

“Are you sure it’s safe for them to be exploring with this Jack-in-the-Green around?” Granma Sylvie asked. “I was thinking Ivy and Seb could work with you in the House of Bells.”

Ethel batted a glove through the air. “Nonsense. The very essence of being an uncommoner is the pursuit of the unexplored, the spirit of adventure. For thousands of years, our kind have been hunting uncommon objects and discovering what they can do.” Her eyes softened. “They’ll be fine, Sylv, I promise.”

“We won’t go far,” Ivy assured her granma. “We can stay in touch via featherlight.”

“Yeah,” Seb agreed. “Please?”

Granma Sylvie stared at them for a long moment. Finally, she sighed. “OK, but any more sightings of this Jack-in-the-Green and you stay inside at the Cabbage Moon. Understood?”

They both nodded.

Seb assessed the spread of food on the table. “Now, what to have, what to have…”

There were bowls of fresh raspberries and glistening melon balls, plates of miniature Victoria sponges, tiny Scotch eggs, cucumber sandwiches…And among the regular food, Ivy spotted the occasional *uncommon* dish—a tier of fighting scones that kept turning one another to crumbs and a bubbling jar of lemon curd that made a sound like a trumpet every time it popped.

Seb reached for a miniature pork pie and took a large bite.

Ivy nudged him in the ribs. “There’s no time for this; we’ve got to get going.”

He scowled at her, his cheeks bulging, then gulped.

Ethel was nibbling on a chicken drumstick. “So what do you think of Lundinor in the spring, then?”

“It’s *different,*” Ivy said.

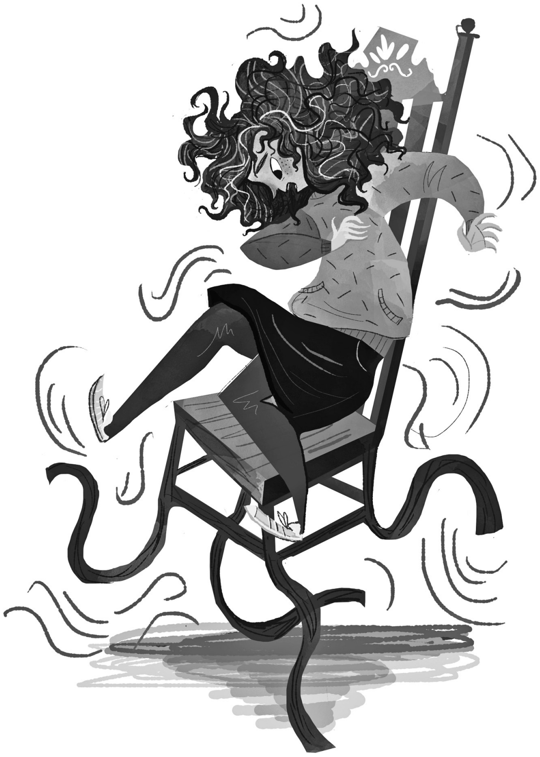
Ethel pointed her drumstick toward the bandstand in the center of the green, where a single table of diners was being served by waiters in black-and-white Hobsmatch. “Got Mr. Punch to thank for that. Not sure how he does it, though. He’s over there at the quartermasters’ table.”

Ivy spotted Mr. Punch deep in conversation under the bandstand. His wiry cinnamon beard fell over the lapels of a long scarlet ringmaster’s coat, and a black top hat sat proudly on his head. There were two other diners at the table who, Ivy deduced, were the quartermasters of the West End and the East End: a plump blond woman wearing a rust-colored dress and medieval veil, and a scrawny gentleman in a shabby brown suit, fedora and sunglasses. Between them a chair stood empty, where Selena Grimes should be sitting. Ivy wondered where she was.

A tiny white plate appeared on the table in front of Ivy. Seb frowned at the identical saucer that had materialized before him. “That’s a bit small, isn’t it? For all this food…”

Ivy regarded the other diners. Perhaps you were supposed to eat very little at the Timbermeal; all the portions looked small and no one had filled their plates.

All of a sudden her chair vibrated. “What in the—?” She grabbed hold of the seat as, of its own accord, it rose and began moving to the left.



She looked up. Everywhere, the chairs had started changing places. Heavy armchairs were lumbering on to the next table, while dainty barstools did pirouettes and ornate dining chairs waltzed their way forward. It looked like a strange, awkward dance, but the diners were eager to see where their chair might be taking them.

“Ivy, what’s happening?” Seb shouted, dropping his pork pie into his lap and grabbing the arms of his chair.

“I don’t know!” She saw that all the other diners had put down their empty plates before taking a firm hold of their seats. “This must be what uncommon chairs do.”

Granma Sylvie dug her fingernails into the seat of the chaise longue as it started to move, her face flushing. “Ivy! Seb?”

"It's OK!" Ivy called. "We'll meet you back at the House of Bells later! We'll stay out of trouble!" She saw Granma Sylvie's fretful expression, but Ethel gave her a firm smile and Granma Sylvie's shoulders relaxed.

"Way to give you indigestion," Seb complained as his chair tap-danced off.

Ivy's chair strutted over to another table, this one laden with poached pears and tea cakes and…

"Fondant fancy?" a lady asked, offering Ivy a plate of tiny square cakes. "They're awfully light."

"Oh, er…No thanks." She reached for the table edge to steady herself, but her fingers met the grubby digits of another. "Sorry," she mumbled, turning to the diner at her side, "I didn't mea—" Her words died in her throat.

On her left, lounging in a straw beach chair, was a pale man in a tatty waistcoat, ripped jeans and sneakers. He smiled, showing broken teeth. "Pleasure to see you again, Ivy Sparrow." He removed a wobbling jester's hat from his head and offered her a little bow of greeting.

Ivy smiled awkwardly. *Johnny Hands*. He was a ghoul like Selena Grimes, and over five hundred years old, if she remembered correctly.

"What ever happened to that yo-yo I gave you?" he asked. "Make good use of it?"

Ivy tried to swallow her shock at seeing him again. Johnny Hands was one of Valian's Trade contacts—a scout who dealt in weapons. Remembering her previous dealings with him, she knew he could be trusted only so far. "I don't have it anymore. I lost it in the basement of the Wrench Mansion," she told him.

Johnny Hands shrugged. "Things are rarely lost forever in Lundinor." He picked up a tea cake and two segments of poached pear and put them on his plate. He looked at the fondant fancies, but the dish was out of reach.

Ivy's mind started turning. The last time she'd wanted information about something uncommon, Johnny Hands had given her a good lead. He was devious, though; she’d need to ask carefully if she wanted help this time.

“Mr. Hands,” she began, idly stroking the edge of her plate. “There are a lot of doors in Lundinor that lead to all kinds of places. Have you ever seen a black door?”

Johnny Hands took a bite of his tea cake. “There are many black doors, dear girl.”

“Right,” Ivy said. “But what about a black door with a symbol painted on it? Say, a smoking hourglass.”

Johnny Hands’s eyes glinted. “A smoking hourglass?” He fingered his chin. “I’ve got a hazy memory of a black door covered in smoke, but”—he stretched his neck toward the distant fondant fancies—“I’m not sure I have the strength to remember.”

Ivy took the hint. She grabbed the plate of little cakes and slid them across. Johnny Hands grinned before selecting one, pinkie extended.

“Yes, now I recall exactly where I saw it: there’s a black door in the middle of the carousel in Hangman’s Square, in the Dead End. I’ve seen smoke coming from it quite often.” He winced. “Smoke’s a bad omen in Lundinor.”

“A carousel?” Ivy repeated. “Why would—?”

“Any further answers I’m afraid you’ll have to pay for.” He eyed the fondant fancy. “Properly.” He reached into his trouser pocket and brought out a small black card, handing it to Ivy. There was gold text on one side that read:

Jonathan Edward Hands, Esq.
Procurer of Uncommon Arms
Member of the Guild of Tidemongers

“Do you like it? I’ve had them printed with this new forwarding ink. You only have to hold the card and say, ‘I desire to inquire,’ and then I get the message. You can contact me with this if you want to make a deal."

Before Ivy could respond, she felt her chair rising off the ground again.

Johnny Hands snatched up his plate and put it in his lap, grumbling. "They never give you enough time to try everything." He lifted his fondant fancy into the air as if it was a sword and he was about to ride into battle. "Onward!"

Ivy's chair quickstepped with a garden bench on its way to the next table. Seb turned up opposite, his face flushed. "At least now we know why the plates are so small," he said. "And I think the chairs move to allow everyone to meet each other."

Ivy smiled weakly, her mind churning after what Johnny Hands had said. Ensuring the other diners weren't listening in, she told Seb what she'd learned.

"I know Hands." Seb nodded. "Dead guy, weird jester's hat." He allowed the end of one of his uncommon drumsticks to poke out of his sleeve. "Gave me these."

"But a door on a carousel in the Dead End…" Ivy had experienced uncommon doors before: they led to a different place each time they were opened. It could be one of those. "In Granma's memory, Selena Grimes was behind the door. If this is the same door, it might lead us to the Jar of Shadows. We have to investigate it."

Seb sighed and nudged his plate away. "Guess I'm done here, then."

Ivy's chair reared back on its hind legs and began to tango off toward another table.

Not again…

"I'll meet you outside!" she called, gripping the underside of her seat.

CHAPTER FIVE

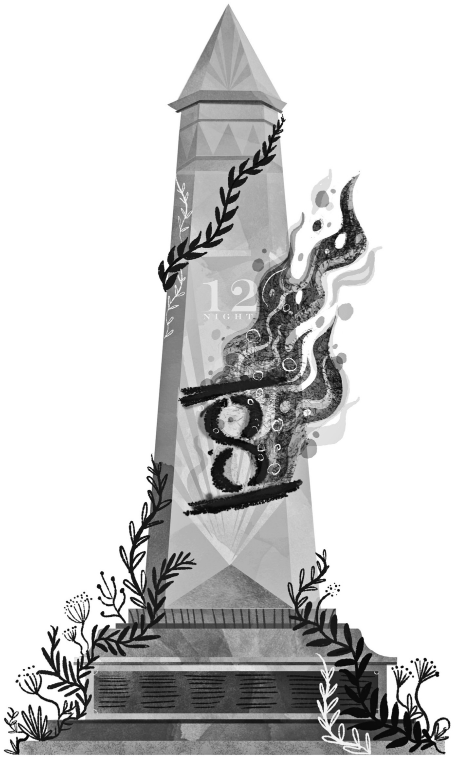
"OK, OK, fine. I'll ask." Seb reached up and rang the nearest street bell. "Which way to the Well at the World's End?" He looked at Ivy to check he'd said it right.

The bell jangled. *"Take the third left off the Gauntlet, go to the end of Rhubarb Lane and it's in the square opposite."*

Ivy thanked the bell before flashing Seb a smug smile. She had discovered on their last visit that the Dead End was entered via the well; Seb should learn to believe her.

They walked on, hearing laughs and groans from the revelers—both living and dead—as they left the Market Cross and stumbled back to their shops and tents. Ivy thought of Scratch tucked away in her satchel. It seemed odd that her little friend was connected to the races of the dead, but all uncommon objects got their powers from the same thing—fragments of a broken soul. Somewhere out there, Ivy reflected, was a dead creature made of the other part of the soul inside Scratch.

A little way down the Gauntlet they came upon a crowd gathering at the base of a white obelisk in the middle of the road.



“The Great Cavern Memorial,” Ivy whispered to Seb. “Why are there so many people here?” She knew that the memorial had been erected in memory of those who lost their lives on Twelfth Night 1969, when the Dirge had led an army of the dead onto the streets. Ivy liked that it had remained unchanged after Lundinor’s grand spring transformation; it seemed more respectful.

As she drew closer, she saw that the traders were in great distress. Some had tears running down their cheeks; others were clutching a hand to their chest, gasping and shaking their heads.

Grabbing Seb’s arm, Ivy squeezed her way toward the front: a symbol had been sprayed across the immaculate alabaster in garish purple paint. It fizzed, giving off plumes of vapor. As Ivy identified the design, goose pimples rippled across her arms.

A figure eight with a flat top and bottom; *and* it was smoking, just like in Granma Sylvie’s memory. It was unmistakable:

The smoking hourglass.

Seb’s eyebrows jumped halfway up his forehead. This couldn’t be a coincidence.

As Ivy shuffled forward, trying to get a closer look, she heard a shrill scream, which silenced the traders. It was followed by a deep, gruff voice, pleading.

“That’s my Freddy!” cried an elderly woman. “It’s his voice—I’d know it anywhere. It’s coming from beyond the grave!” She pointed a shaky finger at the memorial plaque.

Ivy scanned the list of names engraved on the brass. FRED FAIRWEATHER was the third one.

“The paint!” someone shouted. “It’s doing something to the memorial so that we can hear the voices of those who perished on Twelfth Night!”

Seb signaled toward the opposite side of the memorial. “That’s not all it’s done,” he told Ivy in a grave voice.

Lying on the grass there, she saw the lifeless bodies of two underguards, their black capes spread out beneath them. Their necks were coated in a crusty purple fungus—the same color as the graffiti.

“…and it’s got to be them,” Ivy heard someone uttering. “Who else would be behind such a thing?”

“Poor blighters. ’Eard they tried to get it off the memorial…The paint poisoned ’em, apparently.”

“Yes, but what does it mean? Has anyone seen that symbol before?”

“I’ll bet you five grade it’s got something to do with the Fallen Guild.”

“Poisoned,” Ivy said softly. *Again.* With a heavy heart, she wondered what Valian would make of it all. She hoped he’d had some success at the Scouts’ Union and was on his way to meet them; they could use his help.

She stared at the hourglass, at the purple vapor fizzing off it. The symbol was dangerous, and no one seemed to know what it meant.

All at once several figures in black underguard uniforms pushed their way through the crowd. With a sinking feeling, Ivy recognized the milk-white skin and dark glasses of one of them.

Officer Smokehart. His long black cape twitched as he came to a halt at the foot of the memorial. There was something new about his uniform, Ivy noticed: a red trim on his shoulders.

“Your attention!” he roared, and everyone fell silent. Smokehart had the kind of voice that made nails down a blackboard sound pleasant. Ivy wondered if it was public knowledge that he was one of the Eyre Folk, a race of the dead. She knew that behind those glasses of his were two empty sockets of swirling darkness.

“This is the scene of a very serious crime,” Smokehart announced. “There may be vital evidence beneath your feet; be careful when you disperse. We will be questioning everyone in due course.”

Behind the memorial, a trio of underguards covered their colleagues’ bodies with black sheets.

Smokehart examined the graffiti, being sure to stay a safe distance away. It was still smoking and emitting anguished cries. “It appears that our culprit has no respect for the Departed.” Ivy saw his studded gloves curl into fists. “I can assure you all that whoever is responsible for this will be hunted down and punished using the full power of GUT law.”

There were a few claps and shouts of support, though most people simply muttered quietly to one another. Ivy touched her wrist, remembering how sore it had been when Smokehart gripped it. She knew he’d stop at nothing to uphold the law, no matter what methods he needed to use.

“Inspector Smokehart!” cried a voice.

The traders parted—and suddenly Ivy’s skin turned to ice. She gripped Seb’s arm as Selena Grimes glided up to the memorial, tossing her sleek dark braid over her shoulder. She was wearing a purple silk dress that floated over the grass.

“What’s she doing here?” Seb hissed.

Ivy ground her teeth, suspicious of Selena’s swift arrival. “I’m not sure, but she’s still quartermaster of the Dead End. That means she’s in charge of the underguard.”

Selena Grimes laid a gloved hand on the memorial and lowered her head. Ivy noticed several underguards pointing something at her. Catching a glint of silver between their thumbs and forefingers, she racked her brain. Uncommon needles—she'd once learned they were used as video cameras. Perhaps this scene was being broadcast around Lundinor.

When Selena looked up, her blue eyes were brimming with tears. She skimmed the faces in the audience. "My thoughts are with the families of the two honorable underguards who have lost their lives here today," she said in a honeyed voice. "This is an unspeakably evil crime."

Liar! Ivy wanted to shout, but she knew it wouldn't do any good. Selena had held too much power for too long: the uncommoners of Lundinor wouldn't question her position.

Selena glided around the edge of the crowd. "I'm sure Inspector Smokehart and his team will do everything they can to remove this vile substance as soon as possible. We *will* find the culprit."

Someone shouted something about the Fallen Guild, but Selena silenced them by raising her glove. "I do not think it is wise to draw hasty conclusions. We must wait until the investigation concludes."

People began to mutter again. Ivy watched their nodding heads; clearly, they believed everything Selena said.

"For extra security," Selena continued, "I have granted the underguard a number of additional powers. Not only has underguard equipment been improved but, from today, Inspector Smokehart and his team will be able to send convicted criminals directly to the Skaptikon. I believe reopening the facility will act as a strong deterrent against committing crimes like this."

The crowd was growing restless. As Ivy tried to make out what they were saying, she felt Scratch stirring in her satchel. The mention of this Skaptikon—whatever it was—had made him agitated.

Smokehart's lips curled into a thin smile. "Thank you, Lady Grimes. I'm sure I speak on behalf of all uncommoners when I say that Lundinor is a safer undermart when someone with your foresight is in place to lead us."

There was a spontaneous murmur of agreement, then a man at the front shook a fist in Smokehart's direction. "What about Jack-in-the-Green?" he demanded. "He's still on the loose!"

Smokehart stiffened. “Regarding the sightings of a certain infamous criminal in other undermarts, I can assure you that, in Lundinor, we have everything under control.”

Selena hovered toward the bystander. “Do not doubt, sir, that I will use every resource in my power to protect the traders of Lundinor from *all* criminals.” She scanned the gathered faces.

Ivy tried to hide, but her movement attracted attention. Selena Grimes’s dazzling eyes fixed on her and then flicked to Seb. Her expression faltered.

Ivy’s heart was in her mouth. All she could hope was that, with so many people present, Selena wouldn’t try to harm them.

Very slowly, the tips of Selena’s needlelike teeth slid out from under her lip. “I promise you this,” she told her audience—though she was staring directly at Ivy. “I will not rest until I have put an end to everything.”

CHAPTER SIX

"Come on," Seb urged, tugging on Ivy's sleeve.

Ivy's legs were trembling as she wove her way through the traders walking along the gravel path. All she could think about was how much danger they were in. Selena and her henchman had eyes everywhere and they had no way of knowing how she was planning to neutralize them.

The track opened out into a leafy orchard, and Seb headed in among the people milling around under the branches. He dumped his rucksack by the base of a tree and slumped down beside it, panting.

Ivy took a seat on the grass, trying to catch her breath. There were so many questions whirring through her brain. She squeezed Scratch, looking for support.

"Underguards no signing," he said. Ivy had never been able to fathom how he could see without eyes, but she trusted him: they were safe, for now.

Seb scuffed his sneakers in the dirt. "She's definitely onto us! *Put an end to everything,* she said—she was talking about me and you."

"She must have some plan to stop us from revealing her identity," Ivy said with a painful swallow. She rubbed her hands down her thighs, not wanting to think about it.

"Do you think the graffiti was her doing?" Seb asked. "We already know she's connected to the smoking hourglass because of Granma's memory; she must have something to do with it."

Ivy followed Seb's train of thought, but something didn't quite add up. "Why would the Dirge use a smoking hourglass, though? Their coat of arms is a crooked sixpence—everyone knows that." She shook her head. "We need to find out more about the smoking hourglass. Hopefully this black door in the Dead End will give us some answers."

They got to their feet and went on, stopping at a quiet T-junction north of the Gauntlet. In one direction the road meandered through a shadowy copse of cedar trees, while in the other it opened out onto a field where a group of semitransparent uncommoners were playing cricket. Black marquees decorated with dead flowers stood at the edge, with skulls on poles marking each opening. "I think we must be close to the entrance," Ivy said.

Seb observed a group of ghosts bobbing by. "Yeah, I'm definitely getting that dead feeling, all right."

A silky voice drifted into Ivy's ear and she turned to see where it had come from—before realizing that it wasn't the kind of sound anyone else would have heard. It took no effort on her part to sense the quiet babble of uncommon objects all around her.

She caught the voice again. There was something different about it. The voices of uncommon objects usually emanated from fixed points, but this one was moving….

"Hey," Seb said. "Do you think *that's* it?"

He was pointing to the roadside, where a small well was set into the foot of a grassy hill. It reminded Ivy of a wishing well from a fairy tale—a round structure made of weathered gray stone bricks, with a tiled roof and a rope dangling from a rusty winch. A carpet of dark moss, glistening with moisture, hung over the well.

Ivy assessed the nearby traders, but nobody seemed to be paying the well any special attention. "Pass me the guide."

Seb fished a battered, tea-stained pamphlet out of his jeans pocket and handed it over. The front read LUNDINOR: FARROW'S GUIDE FOR THE TRAVELING TRADESMAN.

"Is there anything else in there about the well?" she asked Scratch, fishing him out of her satchel.

The little bell jangled as she laid him on top of the first page. “Six page to turn.”

Ivy found page six and he vibrated softly on the page as he read: *“The Well at the World’s End was designed by the sootsprite Bartholomew Gumble, a renowned uncommon engineer from Serbia.”*

Ivy smiled proudly. The only time Scratch didn’t sound “back to fronted” was when he was deciphering the coded words of *Farrow’s Guide.*

“Traders must answer a riddle before the well will allow them passage to the Dead End,” he continued merrily, *“a design component often attributed to Gumble’s natural mischievousness. The well came under scrutiny on several occasions, most notably after the visit of Lady Saltwater—a quartermaster from Lochlily undermart in Edinburgh—who disappeared down it in 1773 and has never been seen again. The IUC has now declared the well a World Uncommon Heritage Site.”*

Ivy and Seb shared a wary glance as Ivy tucked Scratch and the guide back into her satchel. “We need to remember that not all the dead are bad,” she said, trying to convince herself.

“No, no,” Seb mumbled. “Just the ones that work for the Dirge, and the ones that tried to kill our parents, and the ones that tried to kill us…”

They attracted no attention as they approached the well. A trio of specters hovered outside the nearest tent, chatting quietly. On her last visit to Lundinor, Ivy had seen a choir of them; up close, even their speaking voices sounded melodic.

Seb reached into his rucksack and took out his wallet. Ivy frowned.

“There,” he said, pointing to the well by way of explanation. Etched into the stone bricks was a message:

Throw a coin to meet the three,
Answer our query and you will see.

Between his fingers Seb held a shiny copper two-penny piece. “Well then?”

Ivy laid her hands on the moss at the side and peered over the edge. There was only darkness below, and a putrid smell crept into her nostrils.

She withdrew quickly. “Yuck, it smells like something’s died down there.”

Seb tensed. “I bet it does. Let’s just get this over with.”

He held his hand over the well and let the coin slip into the shadows below. The stones quaked and, deep inside, there was a sound of rushing water. Ivy shuffled backward as voices erupted from within.

“Well, I never!”

“Never have I seen such a pair.”

“Pair of newbies, that’s for sure.”

There were three different speakers, their voices croaky and sharp, like bickering old granddads.

“Sure you two want to go to the Dead End?”

“End up losing your mind in there, some do.”

“Do you really want to go in?”

Seb dared a glance into the well. “H-h-heads,” he stuttered, hitting Ivy’s arm. “Look!”

Ivy inched her face over the edge. Tar-black water had risen to within a foot of the top—and bobbing in it were…

“Three heads,” Seb said again, pointing.

Ivy tried to suppress a gasp. The heads were severed at the neck; they had greenish-purple skin and patchy hair. They had been horribly mutilated—one was bleeding from a cut on its forehead, while the others sported scars across eyes and chin. They only had four ears and five eyes between them.

Seb turned away. “What are we even *doing* here, Ivy? Seriously—let’s go back to the dancing-chairs party. Dancing chairs: yes. Talking zombie heads: no.”

Ivy gave the floating heads a second look; they weren’t going away. “Seb, with the smoking hourglass on the memorial, I’m even more convinced that we need to make sense of this new memory of Granma Sylvie’s. If we can find the connection between Selena and the smoking hourglass, it could give us an advantage—we could even stop her from finding the Jar of Shadows.”

With a grimace, Seb regarded the severed heads once more. He opened his mouth, but then closed it.

Ivy wasn’t exactly overjoyed herself about venturing into the Dead End. She pulled out one of the uncommon feathers Valian had given her earlier. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll send a message to Valian to let him know where we’re going.”

She angled the feather between thumb and forefinger, and wrote in the air as if it was a pen.

Valian,

Seb and I are off to a carousel in the Dead End to try to find a black door with a smoking hourglass on it.

See you later,

Ivy x

She watched the feather disappear with a little puff and, when she looked up, found Seb glaring at her, his arms folded. “I want it on the record that I’m not OK with this.”

“Whatever. It’s on the record.” Ivy leaned over the edge of the well. “Er…hello?” she called. She tried not to wince as she caught sight of the mutilated heads again; she didn’t want them to think she was rude. “Would it be OK if my brother and I came into the Dead End?”

The three heads turned to one another, sending ripples through the water.

One of them blinked. “Into the Dead End, you say?”

“Say, can you find us an answer?” the second asked.

“Answer us this and you shall pass.”

Ivy listened carefully. The three heads opened their rotting mouths to speak as one. It sounded like a strange wireless recording.

“I am the dawn, the endless race,
Save me or mark me, but please don’t waste.
I have no wings and yet I fly.
If you master me, you will never die.
What am I?”

"I am the dawn, the endless race…" Seb shook his head. "Ivy, any thoughts?"

Ivy bit her lip. She'd never been good at riddles. She hated the way they tried to trick you. *No wings…but it can fly…*She remembered the balloon trader earlier and considered whether *balloon* might be the answer. *But then, mastering balloons doesn't allow you to conquer death….*

She started from the beginning: *the dawn, the endless race…*As her mind whirred through the possibilities, she recalled that the last time she'd raced against anything, it had been to save her parents' lives: the Dirge had sent her an uncommon alarm clock counting down to the moment of their deaths….

"Time!" she declared. "The answer is *time*." She rushed through the clues. *The dawn of time, time flies, save time, mark time, waste time…*

The water in the Well at the World's End began to froth, and the three floating heads vanished in a flurry of bubbles. Ivy heard a loud crack.

"Is that the well?" Seb asked, stepping back to look at the stones. "Maybe it opens into the entrance."

"Entering Dead End below!" Scratch warned frantically. "Is dead always under living!"

Too late, Ivy felt the ground shudder. A deep crevice had formed in a circle around her feet.

"Seb?!" She looked over, but his arms had already lifted into the air as he dropped through the ground, shouting.

Ivy lost her balance and plummeted after him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She landed with a soft thud on a pile of multicolored beanbags. Seb was beside her.

“What the—!” he complained, scrambling off them. “Are they trying to give us a heart attack?”

“Now, now,” said a voice. A chubby man in a tiara and a wrestling costume was standing on the muddy grass in front of them. “At least you’ve got a working heart. Most people in these parts don’t.” He gestured over his shoulder.

Behind him was another huge cavern. Ivy scrambled to her feet, staring.

Seb was already up. “Er…,” he started.

Ivy couldn’t blame him for being unable to find the right words.

The Dead End looked *just* like the Great Cavern—if the Great Cavern had been through a war, or an apocalypse…or both.

Plaster crumbled from the scorched walls of cottage shops, their thatched roofs emitting sooty fumes. Frayed tents and dilapidated huts filled the brown fields between swamps and blazing tar pits, and the charred remains of trees stood like bare flagpoles on the distant hills. Ivy couldn’t see a single patch of green anywhere.

The main street was teeming with the dead. Some of them glided along like ghouls, while others slunk from shadow to shadow or appeared out of thin air and then disappeared again with little *pfft* noises. Ivy even noticed traders with scaly skin and webbed feet diving in and out of marshes.

The man in the tiara ushered them forward. “Off you go, then, you two. Good luck with your business—whatever that might be.”

Ivy covered her nose with her sweater sleeve; the air stank of sulfur and burning. Seb straightened his shoulders, trying to appear more confident. “So…,” he said in a high-pitched voice. “Where is this black door, again?”

Ivy stepped cautiously onto what she presumed was the main road. “Johnny Hands said it was in a carousel.”

Unlike the straight Gauntlet, this path wound its way around shadowy corners and mysterious mounds. The gnarled branches of dead trees hung over the route like giant claws trying to pick up pedestrians.

Seb rubbed his arms. “Is it me or is it cold down here?”

The temperature had definitely dropped. Maybe it was something to do with the lack of body heat. “Let’s ask a bell,” Ivy suggested, veering off to the corner of a tent. “We don’t want to be here any longer than we have to.”

The bell in question was tarnished and hanging from an old piece of string. “We need to find a carousel,” Ivy said in a hushed voice. She could have spoken louder, only there was a pale wispy creature snoozing in a rocking chair outside the tent and she didn’t want to wake it.

The bell swung slowly. “Carou-sellll,” it slurred. “Third right off Undertaker’s Lane till you reach Hangman’s Square.”

Ivy shivered. Even the bells here gave her the creeps.

Sticking close together, they followed the bell’s directions. Despite the disaster-zone scenery, the dead traders seemed cheery—laughing and chatting to one another, bartering at stalls and haggling over prices. A woman with tentacles for legs slithered past.

“What makes them look different?” Seb asked, trying not to stare.

“According to *Farrow’s Guide*, it has to do with the way someone dies,” Ivy said, “but I’m not sure. After the Dirge started doing research on the subject, it was made illegal.” She frowned. “Did you hear Smokehart talking about the Departed earlier?”

Seb nodded. “Departed must be *properly* dead—you know, gone for good. But what makes someone become Departed rather than dead?”

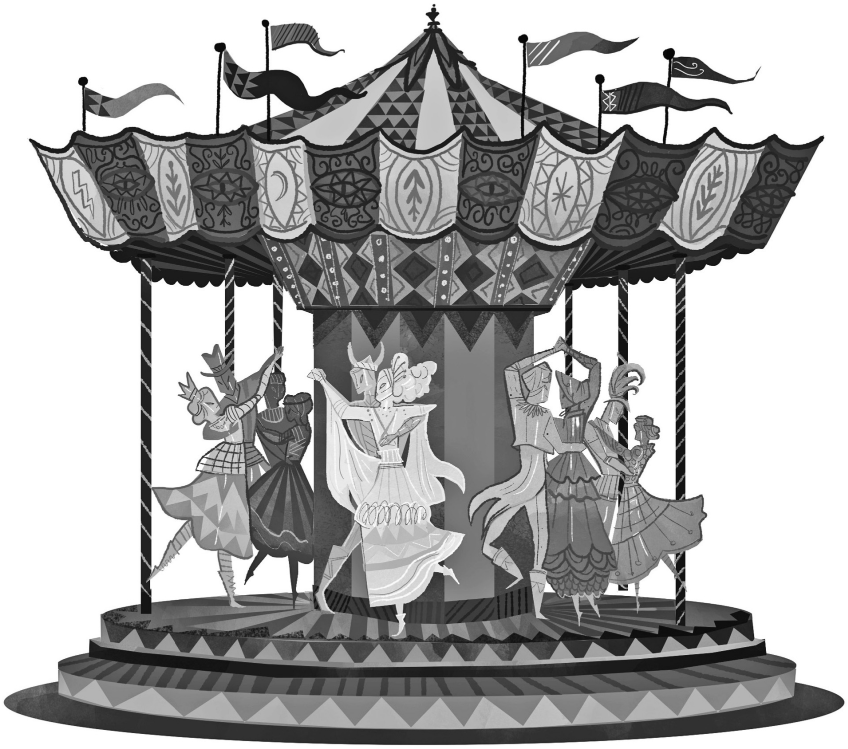
Ivy considered the question carefully. With a sense of unease, she wondered whether the Dirge had found the answers.

A voice buzzed in her ear, making her twitch. It had an echo—like someone speaking in a cave. It was strange; there seemed to be more fragments of soul in the Dead End than in the Great Cavern. Perhaps, Ivy thought, her whispering also allowed her to sense the fragments of souls that had transformed into a race of the dead.

They arrived at Hangman’s Square within minutes. It was a large brown field flanked by derelict cottages with festering swamps for gardens.

“Well, spring in the Dead End is cheerful,” Seb muttered, staring at some kids who were playing catch with a skull.

In the center of the field stood a rusty silver carousel. The pewter-skinned figures mounted upon it moved up and down very slowly, dancing an old-fashioned waltz. Their outlandish dresses, jackets and hats made Ivy think they might be wearing Hobsmatch, but she wasn’t sure. As the carousel turned, tiny squares of light spread out across the grass, like the reflections of a mirrored ball.



“Seb, that’s got to be it.” Ivy tugged him across the field. The carousel was busy: traders with sad faces massed at the foot of the steps as they waited for their turn. She wondered why they looked so forlorn.

“I can’t see a black door,” Seb noted. “Can you?”

Ivy squinted. She could hear the structure creaking and moaning as it spun, but the flashing reflections of the pewter dancers made her eyes ache.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. “On you get, then—no need to wait!” A dark-eyed man with a shepherd’s crook gave her a gentle push up the steps.

“Oh no, I—” Ivy’s legs started moving before she had finished her sentence. She tried to stop herself, but it was like she’d lost control of her body. As she climbed onto the carousel, she could see Seb having the same problem.

“Seb!” Ivy attempted to get his attention, but as she stepped onto the revolving platform she became so light-headed she couldn’t speak. The glare from the dancing figures flooded her vision. She grabbed on to the nearest pole to steady herself. “Seb?” she croaked. She couldn’t see him anymore; everything outside the carousel was spinning, and all she could make out were the blurred faces of the pewter-skinned dancers, smiling eerily as they twirled.

I’ve got to get off.

She zigzagged her way through the silvery figures, shouting Seb’s name. Just as she thought she’d finally discovered an exit, she found herself back at the same spot she’d started from.

She rubbed her eyes, trying to keep a grip on reality. She wasn’t trapped; the carousel didn’t have bars on it; there *must* be an exit.

Suddenly one of the dancers broke ranks and came lumbering toward her, swaying from side to side like a possessed statue. It stretched a metallic hand toward her throat, its eyes solid white like marble.

“Get off me!” Ivy screamed, stumbling backward. “Oomph!” Her body slammed into something hard…and her mind cleared.

She found herself on a fixed platform in the middle of the carousel. “Seb!” she shouted again. She could see traders stumbling helplessly among the dancers, their expressions dreamy.

Ivy knew she couldn’t risk going back to find her brother; she might never get off again. *There must be a different way out.* She did an about-face and came to a knocker with a tall black door. There were intricate designs carved into the ebony frame—ghoulish faces and swirly patterns—but no hourglass symbol painted anywhere. Smoke rolled from under the doorframe, making Ivy cough.

“Seb!” she cried one more time. “I’ve found the door Johnny Hands was talking about!”

As before, there was no reply. Ivy hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should wait there for Seb or go through the door without him. The only way to see if it was the door from Granma Sylvie’s memory was to learn what was behind it. Ivy put a gloved hand on the doorknob. She’d just take a peek….

The door opened easily, but all Ivy could see on the other side was thick, sooty smoke. Covering her mouth, she shuffled forward over the threshold, squinting through the fog.

Just one step farther…

The smoke started to thin, and gradually Ivy could see a small room beyond.

Maybe one more…

Emerging on the other side of the smoke, she found herself standing in a circular room. The wood-paneled walls were adorned with antlers, animal skins and mirrored cabinets gleaming with trophies and satin rosettes.

There was a white chalk circle drawn on the floor, and in the middle stood a high square table with a chopping board on it. The smoke was coming from the base of a large crystal chandelier suspended from the middle of the ceiling. It spread out to the walls and over the door, forming a misty curtain.

Ivy ventured in slowly; she was still buzzing with adrenaline. There was no one else there; the room was empty. She stepped over the chalk line and approached the table, wondering if she might find anything important. She batted smoke out of her eyes as she inspected the chopping board. It had a black band painted around the outside, with a bright red square in the center. She pulled back her glove and touched it; it felt tingly and warm. *Uncommon.*

Just then, someone came stumbling into the room behind her. Her nerves jangled as she spun around.

“Ivy!” Seb cried, falling toward her.

Ivy was overcome with relief. “Seb?” He looked like he’d been in a fight. His lip was bleeding, his skin pale. “What happened? Are you OK?”

“It’s those silver figures on the carousel,” Seb explained hastily. “They’re alive! Well, I mean, they’re dead, but…” He flapped his hands. “You know what I mean. They are *not* friendly! One of them winded me when I tried to get through to the door.” He leaned against the table, panting. “Just let me get my breath back. Then we’ll go and tell that idiot who pushed us on here where he can shove his carousel.” He rested his hands on the chopping board.

“That’s uncommon,” she told him. “I don’t know why it’s here.”

Seb looked at all the trophy cabinets. “Is there anything else? Have you seen the smoking hourglass anywhere, or anything Dirge-related?”

Ivy was about to say that she hadn't yet explored the place, when she heard voices outside. Seb shot a look over her shoulder. He scanned the room and then, without explanation, grabbed Ivy by the elbow and shoved her behind a white bearskin rug hanging on the wall. There was just enough room for her to fit without making a noticeable bulge, but Seb was left in plain view.

All at once Ivy heard footsteps in the room.

"Well, look at this: the grimp's turned up early," a sly voice announced.

"Must be keen to lose," a second voice slurred.

The first speaker laughed menacingly. "He's new. Perhaps he's never heard of us."

Ivy needed to see what was going on. She spotted a mirrored cabinet against the wall to her left. By tilting her head, in one surface she could see a reflection of the whole room. She saw two figures emerge through the smoke and knew that they were dead. One was the size and build of a grizzly bear—except that instead of fur it had slimy yellow skin and a drooling mouth, like one of those jelly aliens she'd played with when she was younger. It was wearing thick black rubber gloves with tight elasticized cuffs that dug into its gelatinous skin. The other looked more human, with raggedy orange hair on its head and chin, and freckles on its nose…and it also had *three* arms. Tucked under one was a metal box with a hinged lid.

Seb ran a hand through his hair while covertly wiping the sweat off his forehead, trying to appear relaxed. He glanced surreptitiously in Ivy's direction, his eyes flashing with panic. Hurriedly he slid off his rucksack and lobbed it toward the rug. Ivy flinched as it landed with a thud on her feet. She looked down, not realizing they'd been sticking out.

"If I've said it once," the sly voice continued, "I've said it a hundred times." The three-armed man was speaking. "I'll never be beaten at Grivens by a blasted grimp."

Three Arms thinks Seb is a grimp…? Ivy had come up against grimps before—they were shape-shifters; they ate the body parts of living humans in order to resemble them. Three Arms and his slimy friend must think that Seb had assumed the appearance of a living boy.

“Er…hi,” Seb said in a deeper voice than normal.

The slimy guy lowered his head in greeting, goo dripping onto the floor.

Three Arms grinned. “I hope the silver security didn’t give you too hard a time on the way in—they might look like harmless dancers, but they can be fierce.” He rubbed his hands together as he stared at the chopping board. “You know what it’s like—can’t have any law-abiding folk getting in to see the game. They’d snitch.”

“Talking of which,” the slimy guy began with a snigger, “better take these off so the Ugs don’t know where we are.” He pulled off his rubber gloves and flexed his greasy fingers, sighing happily.

Three Arms removed his own bobbly black wool gloves before noticing Seb’s bare hands. “Where are yours, then?”

Seb rolled his eyes, searching for an explanation. “Took them off earlier,” he muttered. “Had some, er…business to take care of.”

The two dead creatures took up positions opposite each other, next to Seb. Ivy wished she was closer to her brother so that she could reassure him; instead she had to just watch him try to keep up the pretense.

“Jack’s bringing the snacks,” Three Arms said, opening his metal box. “You’ll probably just want toenails. That’s all right—eh, grimp?”

Seb nodded quickly as Three Arms offered the box to him. “Choose your pieces. No cheating, now,” Three Arms said. “Just pick one of each and put ’em on the board.”

Seb stared hard into the box and eventually drew out three carved wooden objects, each small enough to fit in his hand—a suitcase with catches, a ship’s bell and a single glove with a buttoned cuff.

Next Slimy Guy selected a different-looking bell, suitcase and glove from the box. “What’s your name?” He was addressing Seb.

Three Arms placed his bell, suitcase and glove on the board in front of him. Set out on three sides of the board, the models looked a bit like chess pieces.

Seb cleared his throat. “My name?” His voice wobbled. Ivy hoped the two dead guys couldn’t read his face as well as she could; to her it was obvious that he was about to lie.

“Aye,” Three Arms said. “Don’t much fancy calling you ‘grimp’ all evening. I’m Mick the Stretch, and this here is Squasher.”

Ivy had no idea what Seb was going to say. His legs were trembling.

“Ripz?” he answered, almost like it was a question.

Ivy’s heart sank. *Ripz.* Really? That was all he could come up with—the name of his favorite band?

The other two laughed. Squasher drooled. “Sounds bloodthirsty.”

“Indeed,” Mick the Stretch added. “I hope you’re as tough a Grivens opponent as your name suggests—then we might have some real fun.”

Ivy didn’t like the sound of this.

There was a creak and the sound of odd, scratchy footsteps outside. Then the black door swung inward.

No.

Emerging through the smoke came the tall thin shape of Selena’s henchman, Jack-in-the-Green. He was wearing the same emerald-green wool suit she had seen on the MV *Outlander,* this time teamed with a pale fedora that had holes cut out for his antennae to poke through. His mandibles clicked in greeting. “Gentlemen.”

Ivy pressed herself back against the wall, remembering Jack-in-the-Green’s WANTED poster: *Assassin guilty of murder on six continents… Master of disguise.* It couldn’t get much worse.

Or could it…?

With a cold trickle of horror, Ivy realized that Jack-in-the-Green might recognize Seb from the ship.

“There you are, Jack. Got the snacks?”

The assassin’s gaze moved slowly around the table, but he didn’t react. Instead he held up a gray drawstring gym bag, jabbed a claw into the opening and retrieved two crinkly transparent packets. Their contents shuffled noisily as he dumped them onto the table.

Ivy’s chest deflated with relief. She could only suppose that, in the darkness, Jack-in-the-Green hadn’t got a clear look at Seb’s face.

He also tugged a thick leather-covered notebook out of his bag and tapped it. “You were right about the formulas written in here,” he said in his strange, tuneful voice. “There was a tracing serum that was particularly useful. We should do business again.” He stuffed the notebook back into his bag and scanned the room with his headlight eyes.

Ivy held her breath as his gaze lingered on the bearskin rug. That WANTED poster hadn’t mentioned anything about X-ray vision….

He lowered his head toward Seb’s rucksack and chucked his drawstring bag in the same direction. Ivy flinched as it hit her feet, but her body flooded with relief.

Jack-in-the-Green scuttled into the only remaining position at the table—opposite Seb. Ivy could see the outline of the black door in the smoke behind him.

As far as she knew, it was the only way out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Here you go, Ripz," said Mick the Stretch, proffering one of the plastic bags brought by Jack-in-the-Green. A handful of thin yellowish toenail curls shuffled out into a little mound beside Seb's elbow.

Seb stared at them, straining for a smile. "Er, thanks. Every grimp loves toenails." He sounded like he was going to vomit. Ivy began to feel sick herself.

"Well," said Mick the Stretch, "give them a try. Folks don't call me the best Grivens host in Lundinor for nothing, you know." He waited, looking at Seb expectantly.

With a shaking hand, Seb picked up a toenail.

Oh no no. Ivy couldn't watch.

Her brother opened his mouth and forced his fingers onto his tongue. His face went gray as he closed his lips. Ivy was certain he was going to be sick, but instead he chewed once and swallowed.

Ivy's jaw dropped.

Jack-in-the-Green made a buzzing sound with his antennae. "Before we start the game, I need information." He slid a square of paper onto the uncommon chopping board. Mick the Stretch grumbled as some of the pieces were knocked over, but one look at Jack-in-the-Green's razor-edged pincer arms made him think twice about complaining. Seb and Squasher leaned closer to see.

"The tracing serum formula from the notebook isn't working as well in Lundinor. I need you to tell me if you see the jar." Jack-in-the-Green pointed at the paper. “These are the dimensions. It should have arrived here this morning.”

Ivy’s skin tingled. *The Jar of Shadows.* She glanced at Jack-in-the-Green’s bag with the notebook tucked inside.

Seb shrugged. Squasher shook his head, splattering slime across the table. “Haven’t heard nothing about a jar,” Mick said, stroking his wiry orange beard, “but I’ll let you know if I do…for a price, obviously.”

Jack-in-the-Green tipped his head. “I need it by the evening of May Day.”

*In two days’ time…*Ivy wondered what the urgency was.

Mick the Stretch smacked his three hands against the table. “Right then, now that’s done, let’s get this game started.” He offered his metal box to Jack-in-the-Green, who picked a suitcase, bell and glove and placed them on the board.

“Here’s my rules,” Mick the Stretch began. “We play traditional Grivens: you only move one piece per round. Last person still fighting after three rounds wins.”

Ivy imagined Grivens must be some kind of board game, but the chopping board had no grid, just an outer black section and an inner red square. Her gaze drifted across the trophy cabinets to a mahogany shield studded with two silver plates. They were engraved with the words:

INTERNATIONAL GRIVENS CHAMPIONSHIP 1979, MAI MASIMA,
THAILAND: RUNNER-UP

INTERNATIONAL GRIVENS CHAMPIONSHIP 1781, MOSVOK, RUSSIA:
WINNER

She bit her lip, growing more and more anxious. Seb looked like he was about to run away at any moment. Ivy could only imagine what was going through his mind. The dead players would turn murderous if they realized he wasn’t who he said he was.

“Right, gentlemen,” said Mick the Stretch. “Time to select your first weapon and move it into the red.”

Using a long green claw, Jack-in-the-Green pushed forward his suitcase piece. Squasher chose his glove, Mick the Stretch his bell. Seb's eyes flicked between the three pieces on his side of the board before he gave the suitcase a panicked nudge.

"See you on the other side!" Mick declared gleefully. He struck the chopping board, sending it spinning with a loud thrum.

The air stirred.

With a sinister hiss, everything within the chalk circle went blurry. Ivy rubbed her eyes, assuming it was some kind of illusion, but as clarity was restored, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

Seb and the three dead players were still standing around the square table, but their surroundings—up to the edge of the chalk circle—had completely changed. The dark hunting-lodge decor had been replaced by a tarmac helipad, blue skies and a view of a sprawling glass metropolis in brilliant sunlight. It was as if they had been transported to another part of the world entirely.

Seb's chest was going up and down, though Ivy couldn't hear him panting. Everything in the room was silent—but now the Grivens pieces were moving, changing shape.

Jack-in-the-Green's suitcase opened to reveal a miniature samurai sword, which then materialized—much larger—in his claws. He drew away from the table and began swiping it back and forth. Ivy held a hand over her mouth. Mick the Stretch was swinging a rusty ax. She didn't understand….Had the pieces turned into weapons?

Seb looked like a trapped animal as he glanced from one opponent to the other. Ivy wasn't sure what to do to help him. A red and white football helmet appeared in his hands and, after a moment's hesitation, he shoved it on his head.

Jack-in-the-Green aimed his sword at Squasher. There was a flash of silver, and then, with a *whoosh,* sound flooded back and the four players returned to the room, exactly as they had been before….

Except that Squasher had no head. It fell to the floor with a squelchy thud, a dumb grin on its lips.

Seb grabbed the table edge, his knuckles turning white. Ivy had no idea how he was staying in character.

Mick calmly scooped Squasher’s head off the floor and placed it back on top of his body. There was a wet crackle, and then…

“OK, OK,” Squasher groaned, punching a fist on the table. “I admit it: those were some good blade skills.”

Ivy couldn’t believe it. Grivens wasn’t like any board game she’d ever heard of—how could a beheading be part of the rules? Squasher wouldn’t be so cheerful if he was a living, human player….

Like Seb. Ivy knew she had to do something to get them both out of there.

Her eyes flicked toward the bag that Jack-in-the-Green had thrown at her feet. Careful not to disturb the bearskin rug, she sank to her knees and folded back the top of the bag. She could sense without touching it that it contained only one uncommon object.

She slid off her gloves and, with her bare fingers, prodded around inside. They grazed what felt like the leather-bound book Jack-in-the-Green had been holding earlier, and she brought it out. She could sense voices emanating from within, though it didn’t feel warm to the touch.

As she flipped it over, she started.

The leather cover was embossed with the symbol she had been staring at barely half an hour before: a smoking hourglass. This time, the smoke was drawn on in wiggly lines.

*The graffiti…*Perhaps the Dirge *did* have something to do with it, after all….And if whatever was inside the book had led Jack-in-the-Green to the Jar of Shadows, then the smoking hourglass *must* be connected to the jar. When Mick the Stretch began speaking again, she hurriedly stuffed the notebook into her satchel.

“Well then, you lot.” He cracked his three sets of knuckles. “Second round?”

Ivy checked the reflection of the room in the trophy cabinet. Seb was desperately eyeing the bearskin rug.

“Ripz?” Mick the Stretch looked suspiciously at Seb. “You all right?”

"Oh, er…" Seb laughed nervously as the room fell quiet.

Ivy was trembling. *Think. Think…*She could jump out and shout, "Surprise!" but she was fairly certain she—and Seb—would be killed within seconds if she did that. In her panic, she scuffed the back of the bearskin rug with her hand.

The rug swayed.

Ivy jolted. It was *uncommon.*

"Don't yooo like yoo-urr toenails?" Squasher asked Seb. "Yooo haven't eaten any."

He mumbled something that sounded like "I'm not very hungry."

The table creaked as Jack-in-the-Green leaned forward, resting on his pointy green elbows. "Not *hungry*? I've never met a grimp who wasn't hungry."

Ivy knew by the sound of his voice that she'd run out of time.

She had one idea left, but it was completely crazy. Taking a deep breath, she swung her arms and leaped up toward the top of the bearskin rug, ripping it down off its hooks.

The bear's head roared with glee as its hide fell through the air and stopped, hovering just off the ground. Ivy grabbed Seb's rucksack off the floor and sprang on top, trying to recall the stance people assumed when they were riding uncommon rugs.

Seb gawped. *"Ivy?"* His voice was shrill.

The faces of the three dead players showed first surprise and then anger. Jack-in-the-Green's long arms twitched….

But before any of them could move, there was a sound like a cork popping, and a frayed burlap sack appeared in the middle of the floor. Shaggy dark hair and a brown face poked through the opening.

"Valian?" Seb exclaimed, his voice climbing higher still.

In the space of a second Valian seemed to take in the scowling faces of Mick the Stretch and Squasher, Seb's terrified expression and Jack-in-the-Green's glowing yellow eyes. Everyone was still for a moment.

And then all hell broke loose.

“Kill them!” Jack-in-the-Green’s wings burst out of his suit as he rose into the air, aiming straight for Ivy.

With a growl, Mick the Stretch climbed onto the Grivens table. Launching himself out of the Great Uncommon Bag, Valian rolled aside just in time to dodge Mick as he thumped down on the floor, attempting to pulverize anything that moved.

Squasher started toward Seb. “Ivy,” Seb shouted, “*do* something!”

Ivy took hold of the fur that had once covered the bear’s shoulders and tugged it hard, steering the rug toward the ceiling. “Get on!”

With a massive leap, Seb caught hold of the edge and clambered aboard, narrowly avoiding a double blow from Squasher’s slimy arms. Valian skidded under the Grivens table, escaping Mick the Stretch. Ivy saw him fishing around in his inside pocket. She caught a glimpse of three gunmetal ball bearings in his hand before he tossed them into the air….

And then everything was *floating.* Ivy’s stomach shot into her mouth as she was lifted up toward the ceiling. She was weightless, like an astronaut in space. She clutched the bearskin, trying to pull herself back down, but the rug was wobbling all over the place.

Seb splayed his fingers through the bear’s fur, trying to hang on. “What’s happening?” His hair was standing on end.

A few feet away, the game table rose into the air, along with a confetti of Grivens pieces.

“The ball bearings are uncommon, from a Newton’s cradle!” Valian shouted, his arms flailing as he swam out from underneath it. “They suspend gravity.” With an effort, he managed to work his way toward them, pulling himself onto Seb’s back.

Mick the Stretch and Squasher bellowed furiously as they hovered up to where Jack-in-the-Green was floundering against the ceiling. “You cannot escape me!” he snarled. Two of his arms darted toward Ivy like long green spears.

Seb kicked one of them away; Ivy ducked to avoid the other.

“We need an exit!” she cried. She hadn’t thought that far ahead. She urged the rug toward the wall it had once been covering, but it moved incredibly slowly, as if traveling through molasses.

Seb slipped his uncommon drumsticks out of his sleeves and beat them as hard as he could in the direction of the wall. With an earsplitting crash, the wood paneling smashed and a hole the size of a small car opened onto the carousel. The silver figures stopped dancing and gaped as the bearskin found a turn of speed and zoomed through the gap. Ivy pulled hard on the bear's shoulders so that they swooped up out of the reach of any silver arms and accelerated high over the Dead End.

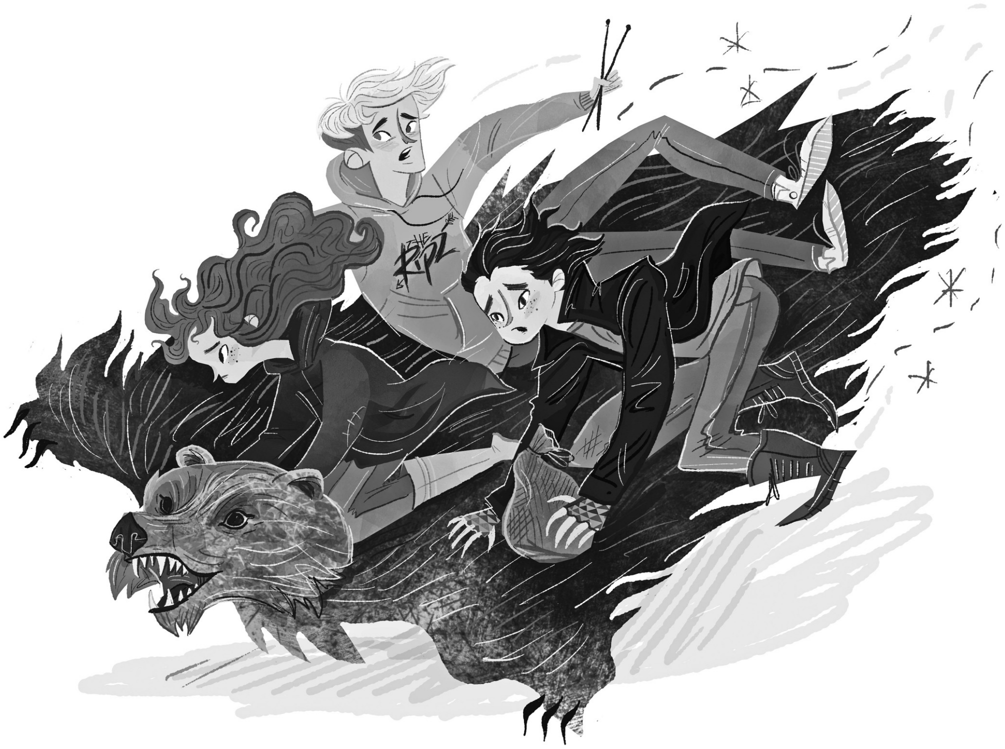
Angry roars sounded behind them. An orb of green light shot past Ivy's head and landed with a crackle in the stubby branches of a withered black tree below.

"What was that?!" Seb cried, throwing his hands protectively toward his hair.

Ivy heard the thud of wings and looked over her shoulder. Jack-in-the-Green was in hot pursuit, his yellow eyes pointing in their direction.

Valian fumbled with the Great Uncommon Bag, muttering something into it. "Ivy, do you think you can fly us into the bag on the back of this thing?"

"Anytime now would be good!" Seb shouted as he was narrowly missed by another orb.



Ivy tugged the bear’s fur with one hand and they banked left, out of the way. “I can try.”

“OK, here goes.” Valian hurled the bag out in front of them and it billowed open like an old wind sock.

Ivy aimed the bear’s head for the dark hole. “Everybody get down and hope this works!”

CHAPTER NINE

The bear gave a roar of surprise as they all whooshed into darkness. Ivy gripped its fur tightly, trying to keep it straight, despite the fact that the Great Uncommon Bag was really in control. She felt the bearskin relax between her fingers, as if it was glad to escape from Jack-in-the-Green. Cool relief flowed through her limbs too—for a moment back there she'd thought they weren't going to make it.

The bag tunnel was unexpectedly short. Ivy, Seb and Valian emerged into a small dusty room that was flooded with light. The rug slipped out from beneath them and landed in a heap against one wall; the bear's tongue lolled from its jaws as it panted.

Climbing to her feet, Ivy looked around.

The Cabbage Moon.

She and Seb had stayed in the inn—in the very same bedroom, in fact—on their last visit, only it was subtly different now. The view through the window was framed by the dark edge of a thatched roof, and over the empty fireplace the once-plain uncommon wallpaper—which could fold itself into ornaments and furnishings—was patterned with warm sunflowers. Ivy's duffle coat hung over the wardrobe door in the corner and her suitcase was on a chair beside the bunk beds.

Seb got to his feet and raised an arm, grimacing. "Yuck! Get it off. Get it off," he cried, wiping his tongue with his sleeve. "I can't believe I had to eat a toenail to avoid being killed. Being an uncommoner *sucks.*"

Ivy frowned. "Are you OK?"

There was a dark ring of sweat around the top of Seb's T-shirt, and his hands were shaking. "What do you *think*?"

Behind her, Valian, still short of breath, got to his feet. "Why were you two playing *Grivens*?" He looked from one to the other disbelievingly. "It's a miracle we weren't all killed."

Ivy averted her eyes, feeling like she'd let everyone down. She should have figured out a way for her and Seb to escape sooner.

"Seriously," Valian continued, stripping off his leather jacket and throwing it over the end of the bunk. *"Explain."*

Seb had an unhinged look, as if he was reliving what had just happened. "What *was* that game? Do you know anything about it? Do you play it?"

"Me?" Valian raised his eyebrows. "Absolutely no way! Even when the game was legal, the only living uncommoners who played it were professionals…and *crazy.* Grivens is infamous for causing the deaths of hundreds of competitors over the years. That's why they banned it in the UK. It's still legal in America and a few other countries in Europe."

Ivy thought back to Squasher's grisly severed head. "The chopping board was uncommon. I felt it."

Valian nodded. "That's how the game works. When a Grivens piece is pushed into the red square, the board imbues it with a unique power—it can turn into a weapon or a shield. The four opponents must stay within the chalk circle to play."

"Yeah, but I wasn't *in* that circle all the time," Seb interrupted. "That's why it was so freaky! When they spun the chopping board, the room changed; it's like we went somewhere new."

Ivy blinked, the scene returning to her. "You *did* go somewhere new—at least, that's what it looked like. I couldn't see you for a while, and then it was as if a portal had opened up in the middle of the room and you were…somewhere else."

"It happened instantly, for me. We were on a helipad, really high up." Seb looked at Valian. "How is that even possible?"

"It's all part of the game," he explained. "When the chopping board spins, everything within the chalk circle gets taken to somewhere in the

Krigvelt and the game continues there. There's normally a short interval before those on the outside can see what's going on."

"The *Krigvelt*?" Ivy repeated. "What's that?"

"It's a collection of combat arenas located in various places around the world," Valian said. "Every time the chopping board is spun, players get transported to a different battleground. If you die fighting in the Krigvelt, you die when you return to the original location too."

"And people actually *watch* this?" Seb asked, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"I told you—it's illegal in most countries now," Valian said, "but hundreds of years ago, Grivens was a really popular sport. There's still a huge stadium in the West End of Lundinor."

Ivy considered the silver figures that had tried to attack her and Seb on the carousel. "That's why those dead guys didn't want an audience. They didn't want to be found out."

Valian scoffed. "If those dead guys are associates of Selena's henchman, they're probably some of the most wanted criminals in Lundinor. That's why there was an uncommon chandelier on the ceiling—it releases masquerade vapor, a gas that disguises dark deeds."

"Ivy and I found out who Selena's henchman is," Seb remarked. "An assassin named Jack-in-the-Green."

Valian froze. "Jack-in-the-Green?"

"You've heard of him?" Ivy asked, perching on the bottom bunk.

"Everyone's heard of him—I just didn't know that's what he looked like." Valian sank down and leaned against the wall. "Gobbles like him can change their appearance, and I don't mean in a grimp-eating-toenails way." He smiled apologetically at Seb. "Gobbles can transform into anything—a tree, a brick wall, a glass of water. I heard that Jack-in-the-Green once disguised himself as a chair and waited for weeks until his victim finally sat on him; then he slit his throat."

"Well, one thing's for sure," Seb said. "With a professional assassin at her disposal, Selena is even more powerful than before."

Ivy's spirits sank, but she clenched her fists. "Jack-in-the-Green said that he hadn't found the jar yet; he needs it by May Day. Selena and the

Dirge must be planning to use it then.”

Valian’s eyes flashed with panic. “That’s the day after tomorrow! I didn’t find out anything useful at the Scouts’ Union. Have you guys discovered anything else?”

“Well, I did get a glimpse of that piece of paper Jack-in-the-Green showed at the Grivens table—the one with the measurements for the jar,” Seb said. “It’s almost as tall as Ivy—it’s going to be difficult to hide it.”

Ivy bit her lip. “That black door on the carousel can’t be the one Granma remembers, but at least we didn’t go through all that for nothing.” She opened her satchel and pulled out the leather-bound book she’d taken from Jack-in-the-Green’s bag. “Jack-in-the-Green said he’d been using a formula inside this to hunt for the jar. It’s got a smoking hourglass on the cover—just like the one Granma described and the one on the Great Cavern Memorial.”

“I don’t recognize the symbol,” Valian admitted.

“Nor does anyone else,” Ivy said, running her fingers across the cover. “Do you think it’s connected to the Dirge? Jack-in-the-Green’s working for Selena. Seb’s right, they might be behind the graffiti that killed those underguards.”

Valian’s nostrils flared. “I can’t think of anyone else evil enough to commit a murder at a memorial.”

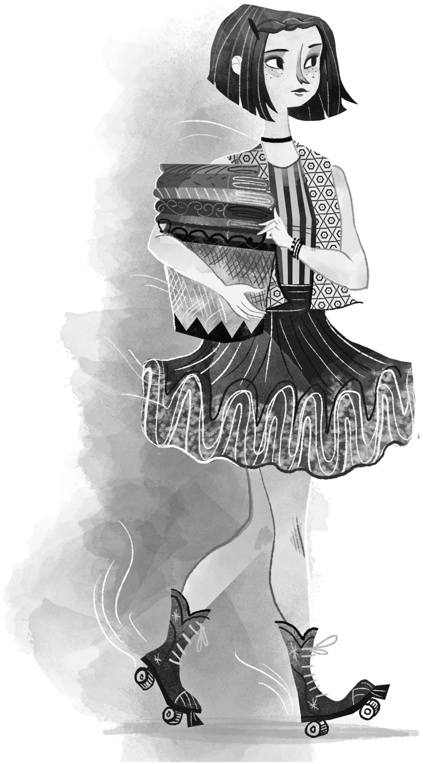
Ivy examined the notebook carefully. Inside, the pages were blank except for the top left-hand corner of each sheet, where the letters *AS* had been written in black ink. “The leather feels old, but there’s nothing inside except some initials. And *something* about it is uncommon, I’m just not sure what.”

“There’s obviously more to the notebook than meets the eye,” Seb said, pulling his hoodie out of his rucksack and putting it on. “We need to find out what the smoking-hourglass symbol means. If Jack-in-the-Green has been using the notebook to hunt down the Jar of Shadows, we might be able to use it too. It’s our only lead.”

Ivy shoved the notebook back inside her satchel and laid Scratch on top. “Shout an alarm if anyone goes rummaging through,” she instructed.

A knock sounded at the door. “Housekeeping!” announced a silvery voice.

A girl with a sleek black bob and wide hazel eyes glided in, a basket of linen tucked under one arm. She wore a tattered patchwork waistcoat and a pale pink tutu over a striped leotard, with vintage roller skates on her feet. Ivy had seen her working at the Cabbage Moon before. She had thick metallic purple eyeliner drawn across her eyelids, and freckles scattered over her golden skin.



“Oh…” The girl blushed. “Sorry, I didn’t think anyone was in here.” She frowned as she looked back along the corridor. “Wait. How *did* you get in?”

Ivy tensed, realizing that the Great Uncommon Bag was lying open on the floor.

“We only got here a moment ago,” Seb said quickly, kicking the bag under the bottom bunk. “Maybe you were…facing the other way?”

The girl tilted her head. “I’ve seen you around here before, haven’t I? Last season.” Her gaze moved from Seb’s jeans to his baggy hoodie, sussing him out in seconds. “Not in your Hobsmatch yet, then. Everyone’s gone crazy for medieval this season; I don’t know why—that stuff’s so frilly.”

“Er…” Seb rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah?”

The girl glimpsed the Ripz logo on his hoodie. “No. Way. You like the Ripz? I don’t know anyone who’s into common bands! Have you listened to their new album?”

Seb’s cheeks went pink. “Yeah, of course. Track eight—‘Misfits Anonymous’—that’s gotta be their best. It’s a total return to their old sound.”

They smiled at each other, bright-eyed. Ivy had never seen Seb look at a girl that way before.

“My name’s Judy, by the way,” the girl said. “I work for Mr. Littlefair during Trade time.”

“Right, of course. I’m Seb. I’m kinda *new.*”

Judy studied Ivy’s and Seb’s faces. “Wait…” She put down her laundry basket. “Are you two the Wrench kids? Ivy and Sebastian?”

Ivy tensed. *Not this again…*“Actually our surname is Sparrow, but yeah, we’re them.”

Judy’s ears wiggled as she laughed. It was high-pitched and reminded Ivy of Scratch. “It’s so great to finally meet you!” She skated into the room and offered Ivy her hand.

“Er…nice to meet you too,” Ivy said, a smile on her face. Judy’s perfume smelled sweet and fresh like watermelon.

“I have something to thank both of you for,” Judy told them. “My mum’s been made the new featherlight mailmaster. She’s been working in the service for years but never thought she’d reach master. She has you two to thank for unmasking the old one as a member of the Fallen Guild last winter.” She put her hands on her hips. “You’ve earned a friend in me; I owe you one.”

Suddenly a shout rose up from the street outside, making the bedroom walls shake. Ivy hurried over to the window. A shiny black 4x4 with huge silver tires was parked in the middle of the road, its engine rumbling.

Stern-faced underguards stood at each wheel, scanning the traders with their beady eyes. Everyone had fallen silent.

Ivy wondered if the 4x4 was one of the improvements Selena Grimes had announced; the last time Ivy was in Lundinor the underguards had been using horse-drawn funeral carriages.

“What’s happening?” Judy asked, joining Ivy at the window. Seb held the curtain back as Valian craned his neck over Ivy’s shoulder.

“I think they’re arresting someone,” Ivy said. Three underguard constables were escorting a man across the street toward the vehicle. He was floating with his head down, his hands tied behind his back. *Dead—a ghoul, possibly.* Ivy couldn’t be sure.

Farther down the road a woman called after him, her voice raw with emotion. “He’s innocent!” she cried. “He don’t know nothing about what happened to the memorial. None of us do!”

Ivy realized that the woman was dead too: parts of her body were so transparent you could see straight through her to the street behind. A crowd of traders had gathered to view the spectacle, muttering among themselves.

“This shouldn’t be happening,” Judy said with a stamp of her foot. “It’s like the stories my nan told me about when she was growing up and the Fallen Guild were active. *You didn’t trust no one,* she said. *Your best friend was a suspect, especially if ’e was dead.*” She shook her head. “I hope they don’t take him to the Skaptikon.”

“This…Skaptikon place,” Ivy said—the spikiness of the word had made it stick in her head. “What *is* it?”

Valian shivered. “The worst place on earth, apparently. After the Dirge disappeared, the IUC—the International Uncommon Council—were terrified that they might return. They built the Skaptikon to imprison everyone who had served the Dirge.”

“Skaptikon means ‘a thousand stairs,’ ” Judy added. “Some say it’s a maze that makes you mad, or a hole that goes down into the center of Earth. Others talk about a place so treacherous, it doesn’t need walls to keep prisoners in. No one—dead or living—has ever escaped from it.”

“Right.” Seb nodded. “ ‘Worst place on Earth’ sounds about right, then.”

And Selena Grimes is using it somehow, Ivy thought with a sinking feeling.

They stepped away from the window, the atmosphere in the room decidedly downcast now. Judy slowly pushed the door open a crack and peeped through the gap. “I’d better get on with the ne—” She stopped before she could finish. “Bother,” she snapped. “It’s Smokehart. He’s searching the rooms for suspects, no doubt.”

Ivy closed her satchel. If Smokehart found that book with the smoking hourglass on it, it would be all the evidence he needed to arrest her for being the graffiti murderer.

Valian dropped to his knees and snatched the Great Uncommon Bag from under the bed. “He mustn’t find this either,” he told Ivy. “And your family history doesn’t exactly put you in a positive light. We all have to leave here. *Now.*”

CHAPTER TEN

"This way," Judy whispered. She slipped onto the landing and stuck her head back around the door. "All clear. Follow me."

Ivy's pulse was racing as she secured her satchel across her body. Out in the hallway, the walls trembled with the slamming of doors and the stomp of heavy boots. The sound of Smokehart's voice reverberated down the corridor.

Judy escorted them to a narrow room just off the landing. Inside, several sets of flying salad tongs were beating the dirt from wet bedsheets, dunking the fabric in troughs of green liquid. The air was thick with the smell of laundry detergent, but the green solution was emitting sounds of howling wind and heavy rain, as if there was a storm inside.

"If Smokehart's got the stairs covered, this is the only exit," Judy told them, opening a window in the far wall. She climbed on top of the sill, throwing her legs over the side. "You'll need this to cushion your fall; it's a long way down." She fished a bar of soap out of her apron pocket and rubbed it onto the wheels of her roller skates and placed it on the window ledge. It made a squealing noise as she did so. "See you on the ground!"

"Wait!" Ivy reached forward as Judy cheerily pushed herself off the ledge.

"She'll be fine," Valian said into her ear. "Clean as a whistle, softer than velvet—that's uncommon soap for you."

Sure enough, there was an explosion of little popping noises as Judy landed in the yard.

With Valian’s encouragement, Ivy took the soap and began brushing it onto the soles of her shoes. Bubbles appeared around the toes and up behind her heels. Touching one experimentally, her finger rebounded, as if the bubble was made of rubber.

“Hurry up,” Seb said, checking over his shoulder.

Ivy threw him the soap before climbing onto the windowsill. It was a good twelve feet to the ground, but she was focused on escaping from Smokehart. She pushed herself off and bent her legs when she hit the ground. The bubbles on her shoes popped, absorbing all the impact. It felt like she’d landed on a giant bouncy castle.

“Over here!” Judy called. She pulled Ivy behind a wooden rack filled with barrels of Hundred Punch. Seb and Valian were soon squashed up beside them.

“It’s locked,” Valian groaned, trying the handle of the gate behind.

Ivy looked up. The fence surrounding the yard was topped with barbed wire; there was no way they’d be able to climb over. They heard the moan of furniture being dragged across a landing. Ivy spotted a black cloak flashing past the third-floor window.

With a dull thud, the back door that led through to the dining room flew open and a pale-faced figure dressed in black stepped out. Ivy tensed.

Inspector Smokehart scanned the yard slowly with his dark glasses.

“Sir?” came a voice over his shoulder.

He twisted around. Half a dozen underguard constables stood fixed to the spot behind him, awaiting instructions.

“Search every room,” he growled. “There is evidence somewhere. That symbol didn’t just appear on the memorial by itself.” The men dispersed, their cloaks thrashing around like a cloud of bats. Smokehart came farther into the yard, sniffed, then rubbed the toe of his boot into the soap residue on the ground. The laundry room window was hanging open above him….

Shouts sounded from upstairs. The inspector scowled and swiftly returned inside. Ivy puffed out a sigh of relief.

“Mr. Littlefair has the keys,” Judy whispered, pointing at the gate.

Ivy peered through into the dining room of the inn. It looked nothing like it had the last time she'd seen it. The holly wreaths had been replaced by daisy chains, and now the long wooden tables were covered in white lace cloths and vases of daffodils.

She spotted Mr. Littlefair behind the bar, pouring Hundred Punch. A man and a woman wearing yellow hard hats and flowery hakamas perused the menu in front of them. Ivy tuned in to their conversation.

"…Dragon's Breath Ale," she caught the man saying. "It's meant to be amazing!"

"I'm afraid we don't serve that here." Mr. Littlefair sounded exasperated. "How about Hundred Punch? A hundred flavors, a hundred ways to make you smile!"

The lady raised her eyebrows. "They serve Dragon's Breath at Brewster's across the road. Can't you make it for us too?"

Mr. Littlefair ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. Ivy didn't think she'd ever seen him looking so tired. "No," he said in a tight voice. "It's their own secret recipe—just like Hundred Punch is mine."

With a sigh, he tucked a trash bag under his arm and headed toward the back door. He stared at the barrel of Hundred Punch that was right by Ivy's head. His brow crinkled. "If you're trying to steal from the kitchen," he said in a taut voice, "then you picked a bad day. There are Ugs *everywhere*."

Slowly they all crept out from behind the storage rack.

Mr. Littlefair raised his eyebrows. "*Ivy?* Seb! What are you doing here?"

"We had to hide," Ivy explained. She couldn't tell him the truth about the Great Uncommon Bag, so she told him the next best reason. "Smokehart hates us. He would have found a way to have us arrested."

Mr. Littlefair checked over his shoulder. The doorway was still empty. "I'll let you out the back. Judy, you'd better get inside and try to calm the drinkers down. We could do without this, today of all days."

"Is everything OK?" Ivy asked as Mr. Littlefair pulled a bunch of keys out of his apron.

He sighed. “It’s just this new place over the road—*Brewster’s*. It’s stealing all my business. Everyone wants this *Dragon’s Breath* stuff.” He shook his head before pushing the gate open.

Judy turned toward the inn. “You know, you lot might want to lie low at Brewster’s for a while. It’s the last place Smokehart’s gonna search.”

“How do you know?” Seb asked.

Judy shrugged. “Because it’s the last place he actually *did* search. I heard some guests complaining about it ten minutes ago. Doubt he’ll go back anytime soon.”

Mr. Littlefair brightened, shooing them out of the gate. “There we go, then, you can hide in there. You’d be doing me a favor; I need someone to suss out the joint.”

Out on the dusty Gauntlet, whatever voices Ivy might have sensed with her whispering were drowned by a flood of gossip. Squawks of “…Murder!” and “…Skaptikon…” echoed across the street, while murmurs of “…Jack-in-the-Green…graffiti…” drifted beneath the trees at the roadside. As the three of them headed across the road, an unfamiliar building came into view: a large cottage surrounded by picnic benches and lush grass. Flame-colored bunting hung between the gables, and a satin flag waved proudly from a pole on the lawn.

“Brewster’s Alehouse,” Seb read. “Come on—let’s get inside.”

They entered among a whirlwind of other customers. In contrast to the bright fields of Lundinor, the interior—with its dark leather furniture and maroon walls—was gloomy and stifling. The air smelled of charcoal, as if there was an open fire somewhere, or even a barbecue.

Ivy looked around for staff but could only see one man behind the bar in the center of the room: a burly, broad-chested giant with a red beard that trailed down over his sizable belly. It was the same man she’d seen entering the Timbermeal that very morning. His Hobsmatch consisted of a leather jerkin and soot-stained apron—a bit like an old-fashioned butcher’s.

Valian spotted a space on the end of a large table, and the three of them headed over. Sitting at the other end was a group of men and women holding tankards filled with a gloopy black liquid. One of the men threw back his head and slugged down the drink. As he put his tankard down, he leaned forward, burped…

And a fireball the size of his head erupted from his mouth before disappearing into thin air.

Ivy leaned away as the heat reached her face. She studied the drinkers at the next table. Everyone was sampling the same thick dark liquid and then belching out fireballs. "Dragon's Breath Ale…it must be."

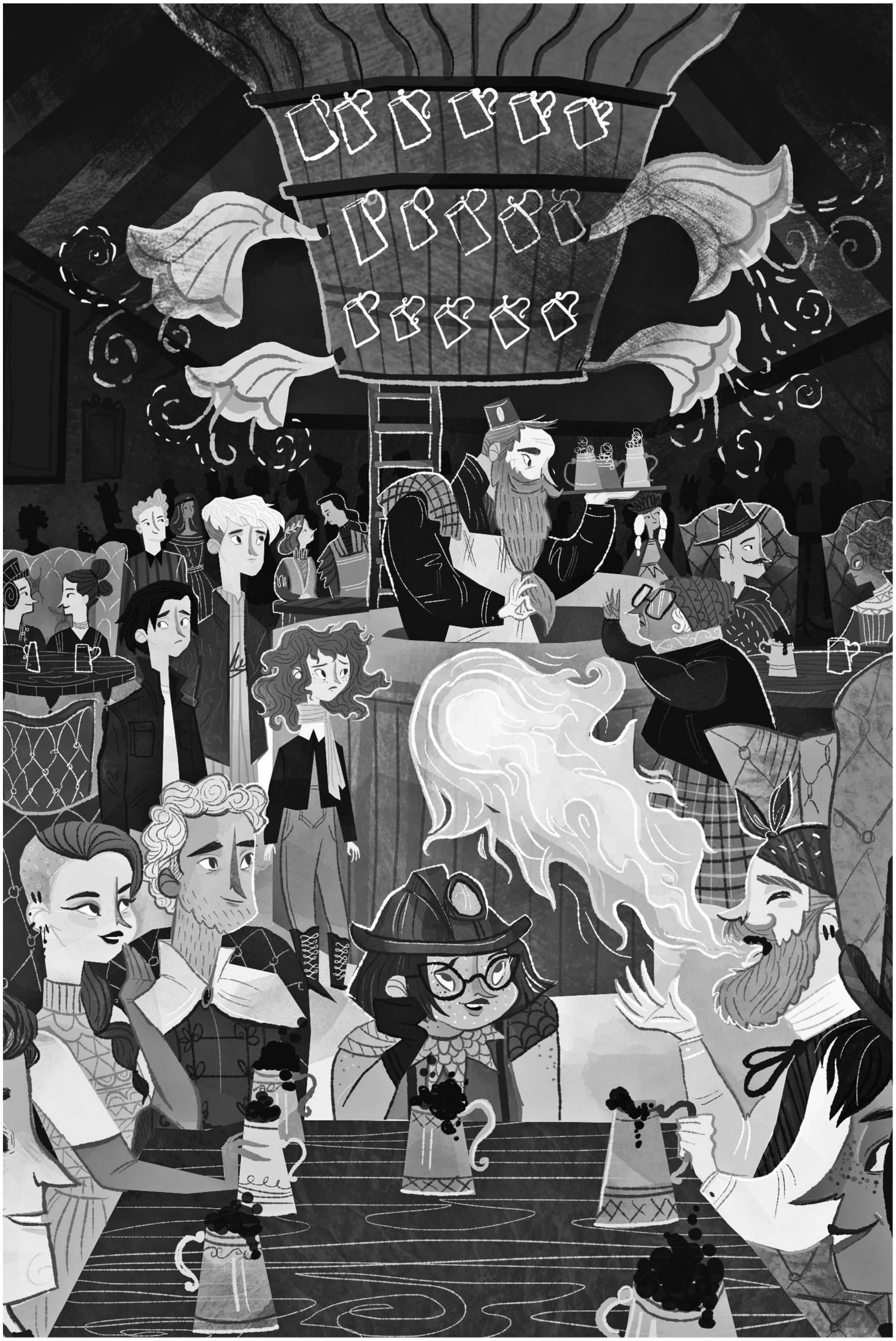
Valian grabbed an empty tankard off the table and gave it a sniff. "Hmm. It's weird: I've never heard of it before."

"Why's that weird?" Seb asked. "Are you some secret drinks expert?"

"No, but anything made with mixology gets a lot of news coverage in Lundinor," he replied. "I would have heard of it."

Ivy wrinkled her nose. *"Mixology?"*

Valian slid the tankard over so that she could take a sniff. It smelled like tar and chocolate. "Mixology's the art of combining liquids using uncommon objects. People use it to develop uncommon inks, perfumes, paints, soups—the laundry detergent in the Cabbage Moon, the liquid shadow we used on that ship—anything you can pour, really. It takes a lifetime of experimenting to achieve the right formulas. Concoctions like Dragon's Breath Ale don't just pop out of nowhere. *That's* why it's weird."



“Looks like it *has* made the news,” Seb said. “In the American undermarts, at least.” He pointed to a wooden cabinet that was stuffed with framed newspaper clippings and photos of the burly, bearded man behind the bar, grinning. In the center, in pride of place, hung a large poster-sized frame.

It contained the front page of a newspaper, the *Nubrook Observer,* with the headline “Have a Flagon of Dragon!” To the left of the article was a smiling photo of the barman with his hand resting on a bubbling black cauldron.

DRUMMOND BREWSTER INVENTS DRAGON’S BREATH ALE

> Prepared from a secret recipe, this uncommon ale allows the drinker to temporarily breathe fire. The discovery was made while Brewster—an ex-chef—experimented in his kitchen at home. The drink has been an immediate success in the United States, and Brewster now has plans to take his alehouse on the road, visiting undermarts across Europe and Asia.

As Ivy finished reading, a boy with scruffy red hair and scorched eyebrows approached their table. A dirty apron—the strings wrapped twice around his skinny body—covered his simple Hobsmatch, and he was balancing several empty tankards in his arms.

Alexander, Ivy remembered. *Drummond Brewster’s son.*

“Hello,” he said as he reached them. “What can I get you?” There were dark circles under his eyes as if he’d been working around the clock. Ivy thought that was strange—he could only have been around her age.

Seb leaned over and caught a tankard as it toppled out of the boy’s arms.

“Thanks,” he said, rearranging his burden.

Ivy stood up to help him. “Is there no one working with you?”

Alexander shrugged. “My pa won’t allow it. He thinks if we get anyone to help, they’ll steal the secret Dragon’s Breath recipe.”

Drummond’s gaze landed on the four of them and he shouted, “Boy, stop chatting!” Ivy’s ribs shook, his voice was so powerful. “There’s a spillage,” he boomed. “Get over here!”

Alexander went pale. “S-sorry,” he stuttered. “Gotta go.”

Ivy watched him stumble away, clutching his tankards. When she turned back, Seb was flapping a hand in front of his eyes.

“Why do featherlights always fly so close to my face?” A pale blue feather zipped around his head like a paper plane. It swung from left to right, and then, tip down, it began to scribble a message in midair.

> *Ivy and Sebastian,*
>
> *I hope you’re both safe and well and have had a good day. Can you please meet me at the House of Bells in an hour?*
>
> *With all my love,*
> *Granma Sylvie x*

“Well, we’re not far from the House of Bells,” Seb said. “We don’t have to rush.”

Ivy shot a look at the door, wondering if Smokehart and his band of underguards had moved on.

Valian was drumming his fingers on the table, apparently oblivious. “I’ve been thinking….What if the reason no one recognizes the smoking-hourglass symbol is that it’s really, really old?”

“Could be,” Seb said. “But if so, how do we find out about it?”

Ivy thought carefully. It was frustrating that uncommoners didn’t use the Internet. She glanced back at the framed newspaper cutting. “What about one of the newspapers? They must have offices in Lundinor. Maybe we could search through their archives to see if there’s any reference to the symbol in past issues.”

Valian brightened. “That might work. There are two papers in Lundinor: the *Lundinor Chronicle* and the *Barrow Post,* but the *Post* is older. We should try there.”

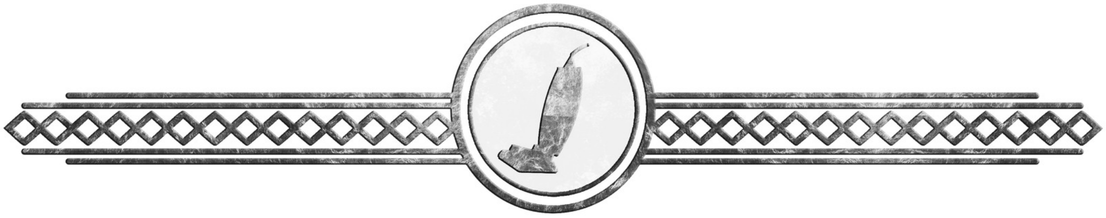
“Ivy”—Seb rubbed his face—“that’s gonna take ages.”

“Have you got any better ideas?”

“No,” he admitted, “but the last time I went along with something I thought was a bad idea, I ended up having to eat toenails. Just saying.”

Ivy sighed and was about to offer a reluctant apology, when she felt Valian’s hand on the back of her head. “Duck!”

She shielded her face as a man belched out another fireball.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

According to a local street bell, the *Barrow Post* headquarters was on the edge of Stationer's Green in the Great Cavern.

Ivy reached into her satchel for *Farrow's Guide*—there was a map inside that she hoped would help them navigate.

"We can't waste time walking," Valian said, marching beside her. "We're racing against Selena Grimes and Jack-in-the-Green; they don't even sleep."

"And we've got to meet our granma in an hour," Seb reminded. "Can't we just use the Great Uncommon Bag to get around?"

Valian shook his head. "If anyone saw us using it, it'd look suspicious—other uncommon bags don't work within the Great Gates. Somehow, the Great Uncommon Bag can break the rules without being detected. We need a sky stop. There…" He pointed to the roadside, where traders were lining up beside a row of tall metal lockers. Peeking through the doors, Ivy spied various brooms, vacuum cleaners and rugs. A man lifted his leg over a vacuum cleaner, straddling it like a bicycle. The machine made a *vroom* noise as its engines started and it rose into the air.

Seb groaned as the rider zoomed over his head. "Is there any way to get around that's not going to make me feel sick?"

They crossed the road, keeping a safe distance from the underguards' black 4x4, still stationed outside the Cabbage Moon. Valian traded a feather with a young man wearing a khaki bomber jacket who was standing at the sky stop. Ivy imagined how momentous it would be to make her first Trade—like taking a step toward being a real uncommoner.

The man in the bomber jacket turned, took two plastic dustpans out of a locker and passed them to Valian. He approached Ivy and Seb carrying a long-handled mop. “Your friend tells me that neither of you have a license to ride on your own, so you’ll have to travel on the back with me.” He threw a leg over the mop and indicated the space behind him.

Valian slipped his shoes through a strap on each dustpan, so he was wearing them like slippers. “You’ll be able to use these eventually.” As he extended his arms on either side, he lifted soundlessly into the air.

Seb mumbled a complaint before swinging a leg over the mop, looking like the kid who had just been humiliated in gym class. Ivy took a seat in front of him.

The mop made a smooth, vertical takeoff. Seb squeezed Ivy’s shoulders, his fingernails digging in. “When will this be over?”

“Try not to think about it,” she told him. “Valian’s right—we’re up against people who can walk through walls; we have to take the fastest route.”

She peered down as the thatched roofs of Lundinor shrank below her; a patchwork quilt of fields rolled off into the distance. She could see uncommoners below: families going in and out of shops, children tumbling down hills and picnicking on the grass. Three times a year, when the undermart opened, this was their life.

And now it’s mine.

As they passed over the Great Cavern Memorial, Ivy noticed that the smoking hourglass still hadn’t been removed. She considered what each element of the design might signify—an hourglass represented the passing of time, but smoke was a warning of fire.

“Here’s your destination, folks,” the sky driver said with a smile as they came to an abrupt halt. He lowered the mop so that Ivy and Seb could clamber off.

They had landed on a patch of grass opposite a huge white windmill painted with the words BARROW POST, EST. 1598. Its crisscross sails creaked as they turned, sending shadows sweeping over the gravel drive in front.

Behind the windmill, a vast meadow filled with poppies and checkered black-and-white tents stretched into the distance.

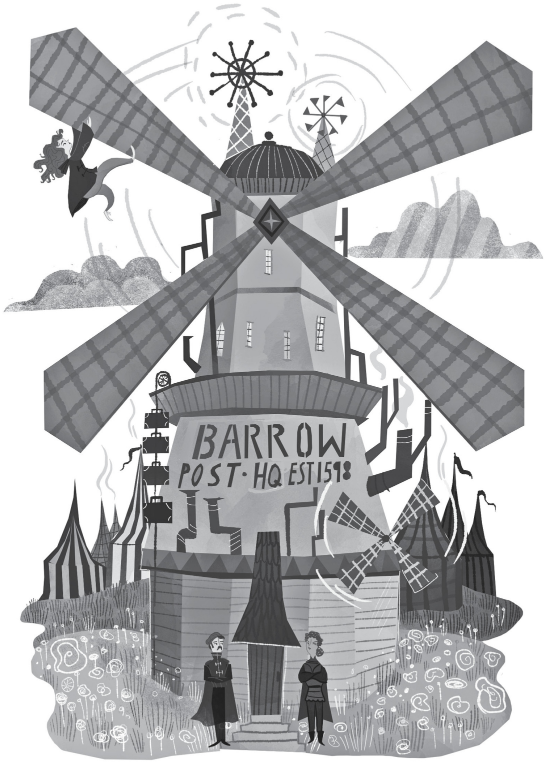
The sky driver collected his dustpan hover-shoes from Valian and shot back off under the cave roof on his mop.

“What shall we say when we get inside?” Seb asked. “They might think it’s suspicious if we tell them we want to search the archives for a smoking hourglass.”

“Let’s pretend we’re looking for photos of Granma Sylvie when she was younger,” Ivy suggested. “I don’t think anyone will question that.”

“Nice idea, but I don’t think that’s our main problem.” Valian pointed to a set of automatic doors at the base of the windmill. Standing in front were two hard-faced underguards. “Must be an extra security measure because of Jack-in-the-Green or the murders at the memorial. Probably best to avoid them.”

Ivy studied the windmill for another way in. A group of scruffy-looking boys and girls stood on the grass beside it, holding dark bundles under their arms. As the sails turned, a child at the front of the line hopped onto one of the lower blades and used it to hitch a lift up to the roof. “Who are they?” she asked.



“Newspaper delivery kids,” Valian replied. “Copies of today’s edition are expelled from the building through chutes on the roof and the kids distribute them around Lundinor riding on those doormats.”

Ivy narrowed her eyes at the slate tiles. “These chutes…they go right into the building?”

“I guess so,” Valian replied.

She grinned. “I’ve got an idea.”

Hoping their rolled-up coats would pass for doormats, the three of them joined the line beside the windmill. Ivy calculated the time between each rotation. There was only a short window when the sails were close enough to the ground for each child to jump on safely.

“I’ll go first,” she offered. She waited till the sail was only three feet from the ground, then sprang aboard, hanging on until it reached the windmill roof. She unhooked her legs and dropped down with a scratchy thud. Seb and Valian followed at intervals.

“So which one do we take?” Seb asked.

There were two openings in the gray slate tiles. The *Barrow Post* logo—an old-fashioned cart with a megaphone in the center—was stenciled in white between them.

Bunched around the farther hole, the delivery kids all stepped back as a newspaper came flying out. One of them jumped to catch it.

“That must be the evening *Post*,” Valian said. “Which means, if we want to avoid being hit in the face by the headlines, we should use the empty chute.”

Ivy peered in. The shaft was about the width of a wheelie bin, ending in a white fabric surface.

Valian sat on the roof and swung his legs over the edge. “I’ll see you two down there.”

“Come on,” Ivy told Seb. “It looks safe.”

At the bottom of the chute she found herself caught by a soft linen hammock. With help from Valian, she climbed down onto a thin wooden balcony constructed under the gables.

She blinked, unable to believe what she was seeing.

Strung between the beams of the windmill were hundreds of hammocks. Some were perfectly still, but most bounced up and down with great force, making a sound like a twanging rubber band. Newspapers were being tossed between them in a steady stream. Ivy followed the path of one as it sprang from hammock to hammock, making its way toward the base of the opposite chute.

“They must be carried like this up from the printer,” Valian said. “I didn’t even know uncommon hammocks did that.”

Seb dropped down behind them. “Please tell me that’s *not* how we’re continuing this journey.”

Ivy ventured to the edge. A long way below, she could see a white marble floor scattered with desks.

“I can’t see any other way down,” Valian said, pushing his arms into his leather jacket. “I’ll go first if you want.”

Seb gave a deep sigh and pulled on his hoodie. “You know your life’s really messed up when sliding down a giant hose becomes the most appealing way to get around.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hammock travel, Ivy discovered, was easier if you were a newspaper rather than an eighty-five-pound girl. The first few bounces were OK, but eventually the hammocks seemed to give up trying to toss the three of them around and just rocked them limply. They ended up having to climb down the ropes, landing in an empty corridor.

“Look for a floor plan or something to tell us where the archives are,” Valian said.

Ivy’s nostrils twitched from the acrid smell of chemicals in the air. She wasn’t sure where it was coming from. A cupboard against one wall housed a set of old-fashioned chemist’s jars. Each one was filled with a different colored liquid and labeled in large letters. HEADLINE INK looked thick, dark and murky, while TAGLINE INK was striped and swirling. NOTE-TAKING INK, SPEED-WRITING INK and 24-HOUR TIME-DELAY INK all kept changing color. Ivy wondered what they *didn’t* have an ink for. They must all be products of mixology.

Seb disappeared around a corner and called back to them. “Over here.”

Fixed to the wall was a list of departments with arrows. Valian tapped the word ARCHIVES and pointed. “That way.”

They hurried past an open door. Ivy caught sight of a massive printing machine constructed from a jumble of different objects—a silver dustbin lid, a car windshield, two wooden spoons, a squeaking balloon pump and a toaster among them.

In another room, Hobsmatched uncommoners sat at messy desks with their heads down, jotting featherlights or studying photographs captured in uncommon snow globes. A blackboard on the far wall was being scribbled on by a scraggy gray feather. It read:

Today's top story—GRAFFITI MURDER: Mysterious vandal kills two underguards.

They came at last to a glass door etched with the word ARCHIVES. Attached to the doorframe were several fridge magnets.

"Careful," Valian warned, eyeing them. "Uncommon magnets attract stolen property. They'll scan us as we go in, and then again when we leave, to prevent us from taking anything."

Beyond the door was a flight of wooden stairs that led down to a small, dimly lit room filled with metal cupboards—the kind used to store flammable materials at school. From the dank smell in the air Ivy suspected that they were in some sort of basement.

"So now we're *underground* underground," Seb mused.

Behind a cupboard door Ivy spotted the back of a man's head: thin gray hair and a roll-neck sweater. A swarm of tiny floating balls orbited his ears. *Marbles.* She shook her head. "Excuse me, sir?"

The man flinched. "Wha—!" *"Oomph!"* He whacked his forehead on the cupboard door, winced and staggered back. Ivy was pretty sure that one of the marbles had zoomed straight into his mouth.

"Oh—sorry!" she said.

He swayed as he turned to face them. He had speckled brown skin and a cheerful face with sharp green eyes. A name badge clipped to his sweater said STANLEY, ARCHIVIST.

"Unidentified Fried Object," he said, smiling.

Ivy raised her eyebrows. Whatever she had been expecting him to say, it wasn't that. "Er, we're here to find some information about our granma. Can you point us in the right direction?" Perhaps the steel cabinets contained the beginning of the archives.

Stanley looked dazed. "Because the lettuce was a *head* and the tomato was trying to *catch up*!"

Ivy turned to Seb and Valian for reassurance. “Any help?”

“To get to the other side!” Stanley continued. “Max no difference, just open up and let me in! When it’s ajar!”

Valian tilted his head like he’d been asked to solve a complicated algebra problem. Seb, on the other hand, was grinning. “Don’t you guys get what he’s saying? They’re the punch lines to jokes. Observe.” He waved a hand in front of Stanley’s bewildered face. “Why did the banana go to the doctor?”

“Because it wasn’t peeling well!” Stanley replied.

Seb’s grin widened. Ivy considered the marbles still orbiting Stanley’s head. “I think he might have swallowed one by accident. What do uncommon marbles do?”

“They’re like extra storage space for your brain,” Valian said. “You can offload ideas into them.”

Like an external hard drive…Ivy wondered if Stanley had banked the punch lines to his favorite jokes in the little red marble that had sailed into his mouth. She stepped closer and gave the archivist her most disarming smile before reaching up on tiptoe and slapping him on the back.

Stanley coughed, and something red shot out of his mouth. “Yuck!” he spluttered. “Tastes awful.” He batted the other marbles away from his ears, sending them whizzing into the cupboard. Then he shut the door, exasperated. “So sorry about that. Those little things have a mind of their own.” He fingered his chin. “Come to think of it, I guess they have *my* mind…Ha, oh well!” He looked down at the three of them, smiling warmly. “Information, is it, you’re after? Of course—follow me. It’s nice to see people your age down here.”

He led them past the wooden stairs and through a heavy metal door into an empty room with gray stone walls and a single uncommon lemon squeezer mounted on the ceiling. It bloomed into brightness as they went in.

Seb paused. “Er, are the archives really in *here*?” he asked, his voice echoing. Ivy wasn’t convinced either. Stanley didn’t seem like the most reliable curator.

Even though the room appeared to be empty, Ivy could sense several uncommon objects close by. The constant din of broken souls was beginning to give her a headache.

"Certainly are," Stanley said. "The *Barrow Post* has been in print for over four hundred years. A century ago we had to move the archives down here, where there's more space."

Seb frowned at the empty room and lowered his mouth to Ivy's ear. "It'll take forever to find what we're looking for."

Stanley handed a small matchbox to Ivy. She could tell it was ancient, because the packaging was crinkled and brown and she didn't recognize the brand name.

"Sorry," she said. "What's this?"

"The archives, of course," Stanley told her. "Just ask the box what you're looking for and it'll find a match."

Valian gave a smug smile. "Uncommon storage has its uses."

"There's a leaflet somewhere on how to use it," Stanley added. "Stay there—I'll go and get it."

Ivy waited till the archivist had disappeared back into the first room. "Quick—let's ask it about the smoking hourglass before Stanley comes back." Holding the matchbox close to her lips, she said, "We're searching for a symbol: a smoking hourglass."

The matchbox wobbled in her hand and, after only a few seconds, burst open so that Ivy could peer inside.

"A burnt match?" she exclaimed. "That's *it*?"

Footsteps sounded behind her; she slid the matchbox closed.

"Here we are, then," Stanley said cheerfully. He was holding a thick yellowed pamphlet. "Instructions for using a matchbox archive." He handed it over to Seb with a smile. "You're more than welcome to give it a read, but it's fairly simple: the matchbox will find articles relating to your search in ascending chronological order. If there are no matches in the archive, it returns a burnt match."

A burnt match. So there was nothing at all about the smoking hourglass in the archives….

“What are you researching again?” Stanley asked.

“Anything on our granma,” Seb replied hastily.

Ivy shook her head clear. “Oh, yes, right. Sylvie Sparrow. Although back when she was a trader, her surname was Wrench.”

The archivist threw them a sidelong glance. Ivy tried not to cringe. Would there ever be a time when the name Wrench got a normal reaction?

He shrugged. “Oddly enough, that’s what the last gentleman was looking for too.”

Ivy jolted. Someone *else* had been searching for information on Granma Sylvie? “The last gentleman…,” she said carefully. “Who was he?”

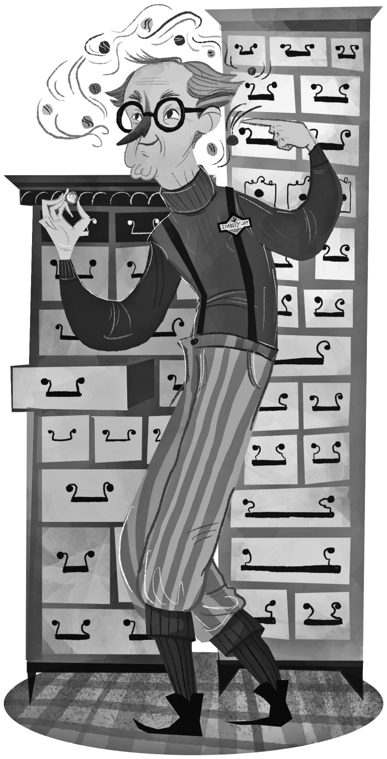
“Never seen him before,” Stanley replied. “I can’t say I’d want to again either. I caught him smoking down here and had to ask him to leave. I popped his face into a marble so the guards upstairs could stop him from coming back.” He signaled to the matchbox. “But don’t listen to me go on; ask the box for what you need.”

Ivy’s mind was still whirring about this mysterious researcher, but she slowly raised the matchbox to her lips. “Sylvie Wrench.”

The matchbox made a sound like a cat yowling and then bounced out of Ivy’s arms and hit the empty stone floor with a surprising metal clang.

“Give it some space,” the archivist advised, stepping back.

They edged away, staring as the matchbox unfolded itself again and again, growing bigger all the time. A neat stack of papers appeared in the middle, followed by a brown cardboard box.



“Articles your grandmother is mentioned in will be in that pile,” Stanley explained. “Journalistic evidence that was kept will be in the box. Take as long as you need examining it all; it’s forbidden to remove anything.” He scratched his head. “I’ll go find that marble; might be able to tell you more about the gentleman who was here.”

As Stanley left the room, Ivy knelt on the floor. She could understand now why the place was empty—you needed as much space as possible to give the matchbox room to expand. As she picked up the box of photos, she speculated about who might have been snooping on Granma Sylvie. All at once this “pretend” look at her files didn’t seem so pointless.

Valian flicked through a batch of papers while Seb examined several documents on the floor beside him. “Lot of stuff about the Twelfth Night Mystery,” he muttered.

Ivy opened the cardboard box. There were two photos inside. The first showed a rosy-cheeked Granma Sylvie in a neat school uniform standing outside the Wrench Mansion, holding hands with her mother. “Seb, look.” Ivy passed the photo across before picking up the next one. When she saw it, she tensed.

In her hand was a black-and-white picture of a grinning teenage Granma Sylvie wearing a white petticoat and silver go-go boots. Linking arms with her was another young girl, with slanted cheekbones and long dark hair.

"Selena Grimes," Ivy blurted. "I don't believe it—they're in this picture together."

"What?" Valian shuffled closer.

Selena Grimes looked fresh-faced and glowing, smiling with straight teeth instead of the needlelike ones she had now. "You don't think Granma was *friends* with her, do you?" Seb asked.

Ivy didn't know what to think. The thought that her granma had even had a photo taken with Selena left her feeling nauseous. "I guess it explains why Selena appears in Granma Sylvie's new memory of the black door and the smoking hourglass—they must have known each other." Her heart sank. She didn't want to believe that they were friends. They couldn't have been….

"Wait," Valian said. "I think there's someone missing from the photo —there."

Ivy studied the edge of the picture. Beside Granma Sylvie's go-go boots was the toe of another shoe: a black leather brogue. The paper was crisp, brown and flaky. Ivy held it under her nose. "It smells like it's been burned." She examined the inside of the box; there were traces of ash in the corners. "Stanley said that he caught the last man in here smoking. He might have set fire to this."

"There's writing on the back," Seb said, indicating underneath. "I think it might be a postcard."

Ivy turned the picture over. Seb was right. There was an address in London that she didn't recognize, and a short message inscribed in impossibly neat handwriting:

Sylvie,

The nature of my work has finally forced me into hiding.

I am so sorry not to have said goodbye, but the memories of our time together will always make me smile.

Be safe, and know that I miss you.

The tone of the message was so sad, it made Ivy's throat tighten. It was signed at the bottom with a strange squiggle, but as half of it had been burned away, she couldn't make out what it said. "Who do you think sent it? Surely not Selena."

Valian scratched his head. "It's got to be the person who's missing from the photo. Whoever they are, they must be in danger and worried about your gran."

Ivy considered what might have happened to them. There was a stamp affixed to the postcard. Last winter she had discovered that featherlight messages could be intercepted by the mailmaster; perhaps the sender wanted to keep his message away from uncommon eyes.

"Maybe this would trigger Granma Sylvie's memory." She thought about stowing it in her pocket, but then remembered the fridge magnet security door. "If only we could smuggle it out."

"I can take a picture of it," Seb suggested, fishing his phone out of his rucksack.

Valian shook his head. "Common cameras won't work in Lundinor. The pictures always come out blurry so that you can't leave with evidence of what's here. Special Branch have something to do with it." He reached under his leather jacket and pulled out the scruffy Great Uncommon Bag. Then, checking that Stanley wasn't around, he stuffed the photo inside and said, "Sylvie Sparrow's pocket."

Ivy recalled what Valian had said earlier—that the bag could break the rules of Lundinor without being detected. She hoped it would work now.

Just as the photo disappeared, Stanley came back into the room, throwing a small blue marble up and down in one hand. "Got it!" he said, sounding pleased with himself. "The gentleman in here before was a distinctive fellow—smart uniform, curly golden beard and a white line through his eyebrow."

Seb frowned. "I want to say that sounds familiar, but I'm not sure why."

"It's the eyebrow streak," Valian said. "The chief officer of the MV *Outlander* had one, and a blond beard too."

"Yes, but it couldn't have been him," Ivy reasoned. "He's—" She stopped short of saying "dead" in front of Stanley.

"Shall I show you out?" the archivist asked.

Ivy got to her feet slowly, the others rising beside her. Something very confusing was going on.

Back upstairs, Valian pushed his head between Ivy's and Seb's shoulders as Stanley escorted them along the corridor. "The chief officer was definitely dead; I checked his pulse myself. That leaves us with one possibility: someone in Lundinor is masquerading as him."

"Yes, but who?" Ivy asked. "And why?"

Seb grimaced. "Who do we know who is a master of disguise and was on that ship? Jack-in-the-Green—it's got to be."

"Maybe Selena sent him to destroy the postcard, only he got disturbed by Stanley before he could finish the job?" Ivy suggested. "We need to work out who's missing from that photo. There must be a reason Selena wanted it gone."

As they entered the central room of the windmill, Ivy's senses were on full alert. Something was wrong. The journalists were in a frenzy, shouting to one another and milling around. The receptionist kept wiping her brow as she scribbled furiously with a feather.

For a horrible moment Ivy thought the newspaper workers had found out about the missing postcard, but then one of them barged past her, running toward the doors. Ivy clearly wasn't the target of their concern.

A reporter with cropped black hair and square glasses heaved himself on top of his desk and spread his arms wide, addressing the entire room.

"OK, everyone, calm down," he insisted. "We've got no official details as yet, but reports are coming in thick and fast that posters have been put up along the Gauntlet. Rupert?” He pointed to a bespectacled man holding a snow globe. “I want photos of people’s reactions to that poster. Get down to the underguard station ASAP; see if it looks like they’re setting up for a public announcement. Julia?” He addressed a woman with wavy blond hair in the middle of the group of journalists. “We need vox pops from the traders—I want reactions! Forget the double murder at the memorial—*this* is the biggest story of the week. Why, this is the biggest story of the *year*! Selena Grimes has just announced the first legal Grivens contest in over a century! We need exclusives!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wiping dust from her eyes, Ivy hopped off the sponge mop onto the gravel. Seb took a few deep breaths, trying to calm his insides.

“Thank you for traveling with Squeegee and Son’s uncommon mops,” the sky driver said cheerfully. “Don’t forget to rate us via featherlight.”

“Thanks.” Valian slipped his dustpan hover-shoes off his feet and handed them over.

Ivy waited until the driver was out of earshot before speaking. “I don’t understand. How can Grivens be legal again?”

Valian shook his head as they headed toward the House of Bells. The Gauntlet was remarkably empty now. Traders had left the street in order to gather under the trees, where linen sheets, fluffy bedspreads and crocheted blankets were floating beneath the leafy canopies like giant butterflies. Projected onto the center of each was a live video feed from the Great Cavern underguard station—Ivy recognized its smooth granite walls and smoked-glass windows.

Seb’s forehead creased as they passed a levitating fleece throw. “What *are* those things, exactly?”

“Materializers. They display images,” Valian said. “We should see what happens; it might be the public announcement they mentioned at the *Barrow Post*.” They made their way under an oak tree, where a pale yellow duvet cover was hanging.

The image on the duvet cover flickered. Ivy flinched as the front door of the station shot open and a dozen underguards came marching through, their tricorne hats fixed to their heads. They formed a line and then parted down the center. Inspector Smokehart and Selena Grimes appeared between them.

Selena raised a conch shell to her lips and cleared her throat. "Some of you will know that Lundinor was established on the site of an ancient Roman undermart; and though its laws and customs have been forgotten, many of them are still honored today. One such rule permits the practice of outlawed celebrations on the occasion of a grand anniversary." She put the shell down and clapped her hands together. "Therefore, in honor of the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of our founder, Sir Clement, I am delighted to announce that a one-off international Grivens contest will be staged in the world-famous West End Stadium the day after tomorrow!"

There was a burst of applause along the Gauntlet. Some people jumped into the air, raising their arms and cheering.

"In keeping with the traditions of the original game," Selena continued, "both living and dead players will be welcomed, although we will be using some new rules to safeguard living contestants. The prize—donated anonymously—will be a trove of uncommon objects to the value of ten thousand grade."

Valian's jaw dropped. A few traders standing under the oak tree gasped.

The materializer showed Selena passing the conch shell to Inspector Smokehart. His voice was flat. "Entrants must drink from the contest master's cup. One glove from each participant will be kept until the day of play. Withdrawals are forbidden. Security in the stadium will be tight. For full details, see the posters."

The image vanished with a squeaky *pop,* leaving the duvet cover bare as it folded itself into a neat square and dropped to the ground. The traders left the trees and returned to their businesses in a flurry of whispers.

Valian closed his mouth and stared at the pavement. "She's found a loophole in the law against playing Grivens! I can't believe it."

"Yeah, by going back to Roman times," Seb added incredulously.

Ivy had no idea about Lundinor's ancient history, but she did know that the Dirge had an insatiable thirst for knowledge—if anyone had discovered the forgotten secrets of GUT law, it would be them. “Surely no one is actually going to go along with this?” she asked hopefully. “It’s completely irrational. You can’t just make something against the law, and then reinstate it for one day.”

Seb stared at her. “You seem to be forgetting where we are, sis: weirdo capital of the world. These are the people who invented the Timbermeal.”

Valian smiled sarcastically but gave a grim nod. “He’s right. Uncommoners love traditional celebrations; the more eccentric, the better. In any case, people will welcome a distraction from all this news of Jack-in-the Green and the murders at the memorial. This contest has come at the perfect time.”

The more Ivy thought about it, the more certain she felt that Selena had planned it that way. She reran the announcement in her head. “The contest will take place two days from now. That’s May Day—the same deadline Jack-in-the-Green has for finding the Jar of Shadows.” A cold sense of foreboding came over her. “Do you think Selena’s planning to use the jar at the contest somehow?”

The three of them looked at one another warily. The people in the street around them had no idea how much danger they were in.

“We’ve still got time to find that jar before they do,” Seb said, gritting his teeth. “Perhaps now that we know more about the Dirge’s plan, we should ask Granma for help.”

Ivy considered the suggestion carefully. “But Granma Sylvie is already uneasy about being here—if she knows the Dirge are planning something, she’ll probably whisk us away before we’ve had a chance to stop it.”

“We need to be careful who we talk to,” Valian added. “We’ve no idea how many disguises Jack-in-the-Green has.”

“I guess you’re right,” Seb said, glancing nervously up at a folded materializer hanging in a tree. “He could even have been one of the officers standing in the background at the announcement.”

“Even scarier than that,” Valian said, “he could be that tree.”

Ethel and Granma Sylvie were sitting on the large front porch of the House of Bells when Ivy, Seb and Valian arrived. Ivy almost didn't recognize the building in its spring incarnation—a timber-framed three-story house painted cornflower blue and covered in climbing roses.

"Ivy! Sebastian!" Granma Sylvie leaped up from her seat. Strands of long white hair had come free of her neat bun and her cheeks were flushed, as if she'd just run the length of the Gauntlet. "I'm so happy to see you." She squeezed Ivy tightly and then pushed her back for inspection. "Are you OK? Where have you been since the Timbermeal?"

Ivy brushed the dried mud from the last mop landing off her knees. "Just exploring the Great Cavern. We didn't go far." She greeted Ethel with a hug and sat down on the bench beside Granma Sylvie. Ethel patted Seb fondly on the shoulder as he took a chair. Her hand froze when Valian appeared behind him. They gave each other a wary scowl, and he joined the others around the table.

"What happened to you?" Seb asked Granma Sylvie, glancing at her disheveled hair and clothes. "You look a bit—"

"I've had a difficult morning," Granma Sylvie said, cutting him off. "This business sorting out the Wrench estate has been exhausting. Only an hour ago, the underguard escorted me into the family mansion."

Ivy had often thought about that strange old house on the hill; Granma Sylvie would have only been a teenager when she lived there.

"More like *you* escorted *them,*" Ethel corrected. "They couldn't have got in if you hadn't given them access—that place only opens to a member of the family." Her flinty eyes narrowed. "If you ask me, all this cataloging-the-estate business is a cover for what Smokehart and the underguard really want—access to that building and all the secrets inside."

Granma Sylvie pursed her lips. "Even if you're right, I can't get out of it now; they made me shake on it. At least I managed to convince them that the four of us were at the Timbermeal when that graffiti appeared this morning, so they can't hassle us for statements." Her lip quivered. Ivy guessed the murders at the memorial and their connection with the smoking hourglass had been troubling her.

Ethel huffed and began pouring tea. “You can’t have them bullying you like this.” She passed Granma Sylvie a cup of pale green steaming liquid. Seb eyed it suspiciously. “It’s only peppermint,” Ethel told him. “Even uncommoners don’t mess around with tea.”

Granma Sylvie’s face darkened as she took the cup. “We’ve been logging the contents room by room, starting on the ground floor, but neither I nor any of the underguards have found anything of great value so far. I overheard a few of them talking—they suspect that my family stored any high-grade objects in secret locations around the world.” The teacup was shaking in her hands, so she put it down. “I hope they’re not expecting me to know where they are.”

“That does it,” Ethel said. “I’m coming with you tomorrow, whether they like it or not.” She leaned back in her chair, a satisfied expression on her face.

Granma Sylvie pulled several objects out of her handbag: a small drawstring purse made of blue velvet, a waxy old tape measure and a stainless-steel saltshaker—the kind you’d find in a fast-food restaurant. “I’m only allowed to take a few things out of the house each day. Here—these are for you.” She handed the saltshaker and tape measure to Seb and the purse to Ivy.

Ivy peered inside. The purse was filled with a handful of small feathers, some buttons, a teaspoon, a china napkin holder and a broken pencil. She sensed they were all uncommon.

“I thought it could be your allowance,” Granma Sylvie said. “Ethel told me that most children who take the glove are given one the season after.”

“My *allowance*?” Ivy queried.

“I added it up earlier,” Ethel explained. “You’ve got five grade in there.”

Ivy’s face flushed. *I can trade.* She flexed her gloves; now that she had something to barter with, they would record what deals she made.

Seb scrutinized the saltshaker. “*OK*, so what does this baby do?”

“Uncommon saltshakers are viewing devices,” Valian said.

“And yer gran ’as the matching pepper pot,” Ethel added. “Tip some out and you’ll see.”

Seb turned the object upside down and gave it a shake. The salt looked like snow as it fell. An image appeared in the crystals: it showed the porch of the House of Bells, with the five of them beneath it, as they were right then. “OK, that is totally cool.”

“I’m not sure if I’ll get a chance to send many featherlights over the next few days,” Granma Sylvie said. “The shakers should allow us to check up on each other.”

Ivy shared a nervous smile with Seb and Valian. They’d have to be careful.

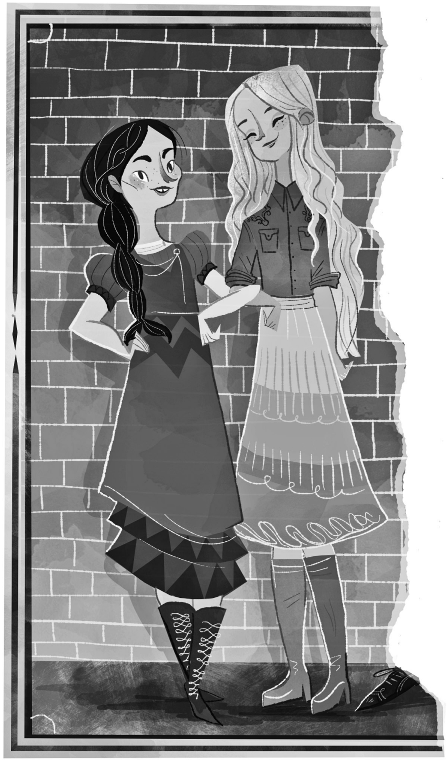
“What does the tape measure do?” Seb asked, stuffing the saltshaker into his rucksack.

“Resizes stuff,” Ethel said. “You wrap it around something to make it bigger or smaller. I’ve never used one myself, but ’eard others talk about them. You’ll ’ave to get that one graded; see ’ow much it’s worth.”

Valian caught Ivy’s attention and then pointed to Granma Sylvie’s pocket.

“Er, we found something today, Granma,” Ivy said softly, “while we were exploring. This is going to sound strange, but it’s in your pocket.”

“What?” Granma Sylvie pushed her hand inside her jacket and drew out the half-burned postcard. She blinked twice before examining it.



“We’re not sure who the sender is,” Ivy prompted, “but the photo shows you and Selena Grimes.”

“Yes, but I don’t recall Selena Grimes at that age,” Granma Sylvie remarked. “I have no memory of her at all, apart from the one you already know about.”

Ethel leaned over. “The picture must’ve been taken before you and I became friends, Sylv. You didn’t ’ang around with Selena Grimes when I knew you.”

“What about the shoe?” Valian asked, pointing to the toe of the mysterious black brogue. “Do you know who it belongs to?”

Granma Sylvie looked blank.

So much for that idea. Ivy was about to slip the postcard into her satchel, when she noticed another piece of paper on the table and dragged it toward her. It was the smoking hourglass that Granma Sylvie had scribbled that morning. The other hourglass symbols—on the leather notebook and on the memorial—had been drawn with straight edges and clean lines, but Granma Sylvie’s freehand sketch was wonky.

“Maybe it’s just me, but do these two look similar?” Ivy positioned Granma Sylvie’s sketch next to the postcard and pointed to the burn marks at the bottom of the message. “I thought that was the sender’s initials, but perhaps I was wrong.”

Seb squinted. “Ivy, that’s the same symbol! Whoever wrote the postcard signed it with a smoking hourglass.”

Ethel fumbled with her teacup. “Sorry—*what* did you say?”

“A smoking hourglass…?” he repeated.

“I knew it!” Ethel sprang to her feet and scuttled into the House of Bells without another word. There was a muffled chorus of oohs and aahs from the bells inside the shop, and then she returned carrying a newspaper and a small bell that looked like it had been carved from some sort of crystal. It was translucent yellow in color, with creamy white veins marbled through it.

“I knew there was something familiar about that symbol on the memorial,” Ethel said, opening the newspaper. “It’s on the front page of this afternoon’s *Chronicle. Murder at the memorial,*” she read. *“Deplorable vandal draws burning sand timer across the stone. Underguards suspect victims were poisoned.”*

Ivy read the headline, feeling a surge of excitement. “Are you saying you’ve seen the smoking hourglass before?”

Ethel shook her head. “No, but I ’ave *’eard* of it—I didn’t make the connection at first because the *Chronicle* called it a burning sand timer. Here, listen…”

She held the crystal bell over the center of the table and gave it a shake. A child’s voice rang out, singing a nursery rhyme:

“The ’vatum men come a-hunting to town
And we will go to see
In tent or thatch or burrow or cart
Who knows where they will be, will be,
Who knows where they will be?

“With flourish and fizz the ’vatum men mix
For five wonders of light,
So stirs a dream, so flares a hope,
What will they show tonight, tonight,
What will they show tonight?

“But ’vatum men no more we see
Now grips a crooked fear
More powerful than e’er before,
How long will the dark live here, live here,
How long will the dark live here?

“Farewell to those great ’vatum men,
We shall see their kind ne’er more…
So hide your smoking hourglass,
And lock the secret door, the door,
And lock the secret door.”

As the bell fell silent, Ivy’s mind was reeling, wondering what it all meant. Ethel rang the bell again, as if double-checking what she’d heard.

“Weird…but catchy,” Seb decided. “Anyone know who the ’vatum men are?”

“The *Rasa*vatum,” Ethel corrected, “to give ’em their proper name. When I was a girl, they were a guild of mixologists famous for staging secret demonstrations. They’d drift into an undermart without announcing their arrival, put on a spectacular show—brewing everything from dream elixirs to waters of eternal youth, then give ’em away free to the audience. The following day they’d be headline news.”

“Like rock stars,” Seb said. “I’m guessing you had to do some seriously impressive mixology to be a member of their guild.”

“I’d say so,” Ethel agreed. “They were rumored to store all their recipes in a vast library, which only members ’ad access to.”

Valian shook his head. “But I’ve never heard of them before. Not even from my parents. What happened to them?”

“Once the Dirge rose to prominence, the Rasavatum stopped appearing.” Ethel sighed. “Evidence of mixology was found at the scene of the Dirge’s crimes—it was said that the Rasavatum ’ad joined them. Mixology fell out of favor in a big way. The Rasavatum were never spoken of again.”

Ivy reran the last verse of the nursery rhyme in her head, trying to understand the connection between the smoking hourglass and the Rasavatum. *“So hide your smoking hourglass…,”* she murmured. “When the Rasavatum disappeared, so did the symbol. Could the smoking hourglass be the Rasavatum’s coat of arms?”

Ethel shrugged. “The only people who’d know that would be Rasavatum members themselves. They didn’t use their coat of arms in the same way as other guilds. They existed by word of mouth.” She tapped the newspaper again. “That’s why no one’s recognized it.”

Granma Sylvie’s gaze was far away. Ivy wondered if she was thinking about her memory of the smoking hourglass on the black door. If the Rasavatum had worked for the Dirge, it meant another troubling connection between them and her past.

Seb leaned closer to Ivy and Valian, keeping his voice down. “We know the Dirge once had an army of the dead. What if they’re using the smoking hourglass to call back their old followers in the Rasavatum and rebuild their forces?”

Valian tapped Ivy’s satchel. “The owner of that notebook and the sender of the postcard must both have been members of the guild. We need to know more about the Rasavatum in order to understand how the notebook works.”

“Ho hum.” Granma Sylvie inserted her head between the three of them. “Whatever you’re plotting, you can just unplot it. It’s dinner and bed for the two of you.”

Seb groaned. “But—”

“No buts.” Granma Sylvie patted him on the shoulder. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it can wait till tomorrow.”

Valian smiled thinly. “Meet me at my place in the morning?”

Ivy nodded. They had work to do.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Seb held the door of the Cabbage Moon open as Ivy followed him outside. “Worst night’s sleep ever.”

“Tell me about it.” Ivy rubbed her temples. The garbled voices of trapped souls had rattled around in her head all night, waking her several times in the early hours.

As they moved onto the Gauntlet and turned in the direction of the Market Cross, Seb studied his feet. “I kept dreaming about the chief officer lying there, dead.”

“We’ve still got another day and a bit to stop the Dirge from killing anyone else,” Ivy reminded him. “The Jar of Shadows is out there; we’ve got to learn how to find it.”

Lundinor was just waking up. Groggy shouts and clinking tent poles pierced the morning quiet, along with the sizzle of open-air cooking. Ivy stared across the patchwork fields and saw a thread of smoke rising from almost every camp. She thought of all the people who called Lundinor home at certain times of the year, and just how many lives were at risk from the Dirge and their vile plans.

On the opposite side of the road she spotted Alexander Brewster collecting glasses from the tables outside the alehouse. His apron was stained and his fiery hair looked as if he’d just battled through a storm. He caught Ivy’s gaze as she looked over.

Hey! she mouthed, waving. Alexander returned her smile before sighing and continuing with his duties. It seemed like he never got a break.

Maybe, when this was all over, Ivy could invite him for a Hundred Punch at the Cabbage Moon; he was new to Lundinor—he probably hadn't made any friends yet.

Seb slipped his rucksack off his shoulder. "I'll say this for our innkeeper," he decided, unwrapping the foil from a fried-egg sandwich, "there's nothing *little* about Mr. Littlefair's food." He took a massive mouthful, sending ketchup squirting down the front of his black T-shirt.

Reaching inside her satchel, Ivy tickled Scratch hello, then felt past him for Granma Sylvie's postcard. She studied the photo and reread the message, which had been playing in her mind. If it had been sent by a member of the Rasavatum, then the "dangerous work" the author spoke of could have been something carried out on behalf of the Dirge.

But…Ivy still didn't want to believe that Granma Sylvie had known anything about it. "Why would Selena want this destroyed?" she wondered. "Perhaps the person missing from the photo is someone who knows something about her involvement with the Dirge?" She massaged her forehead, trying to lessen her headache.

Seb stopped. "You all right?"

"It's just my whispering; it makes my head hurt."

He scanned the road purposefully. "Violet Eyelet's Button Apothecary is over there—she might have a button to help."

Ivy headed over to a rickety wooden cart standing beside the road. It was painted pale green and lilac, and resting on top was a chest of what looked like a hundred tiny drawers, each with a little label hanging from the handle.

Violet was standing behind the stall, her fluffy white hair piled on top of her head like a huge dollop of meringue. Three pairs of different-colored spectacles jangled around her neck. "Hello, petal! Give me one moment and I'll be right with you."

Ivy waited while Violet served another customer. The apothecary was busy. Among the shoppers was a hunched old man with crooked teeth and deep wrinkles in his tanned skin.

Something about him was familiar….

Mr. Punch?!

No one else would have recognized the quartermaster of the Great Cavern, but Ivy's whispering allowed her to see Mr. Punch's true nature—he was a Hob, a race of the dead formed from several souls who all looked and spoke differently. On other occasions she'd encountered Mr. Punch as a wise old shop assistant; a pale red-haired young man in a ringmaster's tailcoat, which was how he appeared as quartermaster; and a skinny guy with dark skin and a fuzzy beard. His eyes were always the same swirly blue-green color, like a tropical lagoon.

"Sir?" Ivy asked, going up to him.

The old man winked. "Nice to see yer back in Lundinor, Ivy Sparrow." His voice was coarse, like a trader who'd been shouting to his customers all day.

Ivy broke into a smile. *I'm right. It* is *him.*

"Lundinor looks a bit different this season, eh?" Mr. Punch said.

Ivy wasn't sure what he meant, but she didn't have time for any more riddles. "My *abilities* have started to change," she whispered. "I can hear voices all the time now—not just when I'm touching an uncommon object. And I can sense the dead too. Do you know why?"

Mr. Punch rubbed a hand across his chin. "Not exactly, but if I had to guess, I'd say that the longer you are exposed to fragmented souls—both those trapped inside uncommon objects and those transformed as races of the dead—the more acute your whispering becomes. It is a sense, after all—just like your sight or smell; it is a way to read the world around you. The more you use it, the stronger it will get." His eyes flashed. "It's a pity you don't have a tutor—someone with the same gift as you."

Ivy sighed, doubting she'd ever find another whisperer. It wasn't as if she could place an advertisement in the *Barrow Post*. Fear of the Dirge kidnapping people like her had kept them silent for years.

"Ivy!" Violet panted, shuffling over. "Sorry—I was in the middle of an exchange. What can I do for you?"

Ivy hesitated. There was so much more she needed to ask Mr. Punch. "Um, I need something for a headache," she said hurriedly.

"But of course!" Violet pushed two pairs of spectacles higher on her nose, squinting at the chest. Eventually she selected a drawer and picked out a handful of square gray buttons. “Is it for you, dear?”

Ivy nodded.

“Oh.” Violet smiled kindly. “I’m sorry to hear that. Here you go.” She assessed Ivy’s outfit and tucked one of the gray buttons into the top pocket of Ivy’s sweater.

The throbbing in Ivy’s temples lessened almost immediately. She started to get her allowance out of her satchel, but Violet shook her head. “There’s no charge for friends, Ivy. Now, what can I do for you, si—?”

Violet looked up to where Mr. Punch had been standing, only to find that he had vanished. She looked along the road in both directions, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She placed her hands on her hips. “Must have been dead,” she told Ivy. “Those ones disappear all the time.”

As Ivy and Seb continued along the Gauntlet toward Valian’s, Ivy couldn’t help but notice the number of GRIVENS CONTEST posters fixed to tree trunks and tent poles. Bunting decorated with Grivens pieces was strung between some of the shops, and there were at least two stalls offering reductions on newly minted Grivens sets, displaying hastily written signs saying: GET PRACTICING!

She caught snatches of excited conversation, the traders speculating on who might enter the contest or taking bets on the final winner. Ivy tensed, knowing what might really happen that night if she, Seb and Valian failed in their search. *All the fears in the world…*Opening the Jar of Shadows would be like releasing a nightmare into Lundinor.

They slowed as they approached Hoff & Winkle’s Hobsmatch Emporium, heading for the staircase at the back that led to Valian’s room. Ivy had passed the store during the winter, when it had taken the form of a crumbling house with dusty leaded windows. Now it was a huge wooden barn with a steeply sloping roof. Chickens pecked at the hay bales outside. Ivy brightened; she was beginning to enjoy discovering how everything had changed.

A very short woman with shiny brown hair was sweeping up by the wide barn doors as they passed. She wore a sleeveless beaded dress, golden sandals and a pale pink cloche hat. When she spotted them, she waved. “Yoo-hoo!”

“Is she talking to us?” Ivy asked.

They stopped as the lady came trundling up to meet them.

“It *is* you!” she declared in an Irish lilt. “Oh, how exciting! Known Valian since he was a tadpole and he’s never had friends before. Miss Hoff will be so thrilled!” She rested her broom beside her; it was at least two feet taller than her.

Ivy looked at the barn. “You’re…Miss Winkle?”

The lady held out her hand. She was wearing small pale pink suede gloves embroidered with daisies. “Delighted to meet you both.”

“We’re here to see Valian,” Seb said, smiling thinly as he shook her hand.

“Yes, he was called out on urgent business this morning,” Miss Winkle explained. “Told us to let you know that you should wait for him here.” She scrutinized Seb’s plain black T-shirt, muddy jeans and scruffy sneakers and smiled weakly before turning with similar disappointment to Ivy’s outfit. “You’d better come inside.”

As Ivy stepped over the threshold, a bell called out, “Miss Hattie Hoff and Miss Gabriella Winkle wish you the best of the Trade!”

“Miss Hoff!” Miss Winkle shouted, leading them into the middle of the barn. “Look who I found—it’s Valian’s friends!”

The floor was filled with clothes rails. Ivy spotted a tall, slim lady with vibrant red hair raise her hand. “Right with you, Gabi!” She finished helping a man in purple yoga pants adjust the fit on his astronaut helmet before dashing over. Her Hobsmatch consisted of a white Formula 1 racing driver’s suit emblazoned with brightly colored logos, crimson cowboy boots and leather biker gloves. She gasped when she saw Ivy and Seb. “But my dears—you’re not in Hobsmatch!”

Before Ivy could offer an explanation, Miss Winkle tutted, “My thoughts exactly. But we can sort that out in no time. We’ll add it to Valian’s account.” She pulled a plastic twelve-inch ruler out of the pocket of her dress and held it to Seb’s head.

He shied away, looking at her out of the corner of his eye. “What exactly are you doing?”

“I’m taking the measure of you,” Miss Winkle explained. “Finding out what you’re made of. Haven’t you ever noticed that uncommoners wear Hobsmatch that expresses who they are? The ruler helps us find what’s inside so we can match what’s on the outside. Why do you think it’s called Hobs*match*?” She held the ruler lower for Miss Hoff to examine.

“Oh yes, yes,” Miss Hoff said. “What about the black and red”—she swept her hands down her sides—“with the stripes and the large…” She gestured in circles on her shoulders.

Seb’s eyebrows slowly climbed higher up his forehead. Ivy couldn’t help giggling.

“Just you wait here. I’ll bring our suggestions forthwith,” Miss Hoff told him.

While she was gone, Miss Winkle took Ivy’s measurements with the same ruler. Even without it touching her skin, Ivy could sense that it was uncommon. Mr. Punch had said that her whispering was a way to read the world around her, and it got her thinking.

She concentrated on the nearest couple of uncommoners browsing through the clothes racks, trying to reach out with her senses and detect any fragments of broken soul. It was tricky. She couldn’t control her whispering in the same way as her other senses—it wasn’t like focusing her eyes or tuning her ears. Instead, it came from somewhere deep inside her. After a moment’s struggle she gave up.

“Interesting,” Miss Winkle said. She peered into Ivy’s green eyes and smiled, dimples appearing in her cheeks. *“You’re courage and tall and love above all.”*

Ivy frowned. “I’m *what*?” She craned her neck to examine the ruler. The black inch lines had re-formed into words, spelling out the phrase Miss Winkle had quoted. “What does that mean? I’m not tall.”

“I don’t think it means physically, dear,” Miss Winkle said.

Seb folded his arms defensively. “So what did the ruler say when you measured me?”

“Oh yes,” Miss Winkle twittered. *“Rhythm and grit and filled with wit.”*

“Has a good ring to it, if you ask me,” said a familiar voice from behind them. Ivy turned to find Judy balancing a small barrel of Hundred Punch in her arms. She smiled at them and set the barrel down. “I got my first Hobsmatch outfit here too.”

“You did?” Ivy said. “What did the ruler say about you?”

Judy tucked a strand of poker-straight hair behind her ear, darting a look at Seb. *“Daring and grace and glowing of face,”* she said in a small voice. “I’m delivering Hundred Punch in exchange for replacement trousers for Mr. Littlefair. Anyway, what are you two doing here?”

Before Ivy could give an answer, Miss Hoff returned with an armful of possible Hobsmatch garments for her and Seb. Ivy spied a frilly white cuff and the corners of some pointy shoulder pads among them. Seb’s legs twitched like he was about to turn and run, but Judy put a hand on his shoulder and escorted him and Ivy to the changing rooms.

Half an hour later, Ivy found herself standing in front of a long antique mirror while she waited for Seb to emerge from his cubicle. She smoothed down the arms of her cropped black jacket with its smart Eton collar, which complemented the casual pair of stonewashed jeans underneath. Ribbon-laced brown leather boots and a red satin neck scarf completed the outfit. The color made her smile; it reminded her of the poppies in their garden at home. Altogether she thought Miss Hoff and Miss Winkle had done a good job. She’d never thought she’d feel comfortable in Hobsmatch, but now she could see why the traders liked it; it was as if she was wearing an extension of who she was.

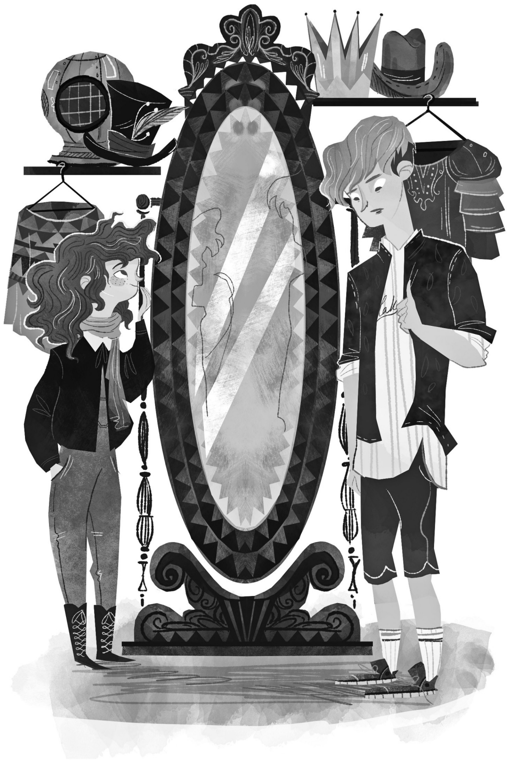
“OK, this is the last one,” Seb called from the changing room. “If this looks stupid, erase it from your mind.” He poked his head around the curtain and looked at Judy. “Especially you.”

Judy laughed as he shuffled out wearing black three-quarter-length shorts, a baggy L.A. Lakers basketball jersey, scuffed vintage sneakers and a straight-cut, loose-fitting long black mandarin coat. It was embroidered with gold thread and he’d turned the sleeves up, like he did when he was drumming. “Well…?”

Ivy cocked her head, taking it all in. She liked the combination of modern sportswear and traditional Chinese dress. “Actually…this one kind of suits you.”

“Yeah,” Judy agreed. “It’s a good mix.”

“Really?” Seb opened the coat, showing them the gold satin lining. “The cool thing is, there’re these long pockets inside that I can put my drumsticks in.”



Ivy was just hanging a swimming cap back on a hook when something in the corner of the barn caught her eye. Inside a large glass case, an ivory leather jacket with long red sleeves was draped over a mannequin. There were gold buttons around the collar and leaves embroidered in jade thread on the cuffs.

She walked over to take a closer look. A brass plaque attached to the case read: JACKET WORN BY SIR CLEMENT, CIRCA 1560. “Is this *real*?” she asked Miss Hoff. “It’s amazing.”

“Absolutely,” she replied with a smile. “We inherited it from our fathers, Mr. Hoff and Mr. Winkle.”

“And they from *their* fathers,” Miss Winkle added, appearing at Miss Hoff’s side. “Our ancestors were the foremost Hobsmatch traders of their time. Apparently Sir Clement bequeathed the jacket to our family before he Departed.”

“Here, you can take a closer look if you’d like.” Miss Hoff unlocked the cabinet using a small silver key from her pocket. Very carefully she slid the jacket off the mannequin and hung it over her arm. “The leather jerkin is over four hundred years old,” she said, pointing to the chest piece. “Sir Clement added the sleeves later; they’re made of Chinese silk. Have a feel—it’s just like new.”

Ivy ran her fingers down the front. The leather was soft but didn’t feel as if it was about to crumble. She guessed uncommon methods had been used to preserve it. Her fingertips grazed something rough under the lapel, so she lifted it up.

Hidden underneath was a symbol embroidered in gold thread:

A smoking hourglass…!

Ivy drew her hand back, her mind whirring.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Miss Hoff cooed, brushing the jacket down before returning it to the glass case. “We really don’t take it out enough.”

Had Sir Clement been a member of the Rasavatum? He was one of the most famous uncommoners in history; there was bound to be tons of information available on him in Lundinor. Ivy needed to find out more.

The floor shook with the thud of running footsteps. A familiar voice called into the barn, “Ivy? Seb?” Valian came tearing in, zigzagging between the clothes racks in order to reach them. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You all right?” Seb asked.

“Yeah, fine.” Valian started as he caught sight of Seb’s Hobsmatch. “Nice. Suits you.”

Ivy doubted Valian would have the same opinion when he realized the outfit was being charged to his account. “Listen—I think Sir Clement could have been one of the Rasavatum,” she said in a hushed voice. “Is there somewhere we can go to learn more about him?”

Valian shrugged. “I suppose we could ask at the tourist information van in the Market Cross. They offer historical tours for visitors. How did you find out?”

“I’ll explain on the way,” Ivy said. “We’ve got no time to lose.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As they hurried along the road, Valian zipped up his jacket. “Someone from the Scouts’ Union contacted me earlier—that’s why I had to leave. A rare uncommon sundial was being sold in the East End; scouts use them to pinpoint the location of objects.”

“Did you manage to get hold of it?” Ivy asked. “Did it find the Jar of Shadows?”

Valian scowled. “Sundials are normally highly accurate, but when I got it to search for a jar within the walls of Lundinor, it couldn’t fix on a single location. If the Jar of Shadows is here, it’s being hidden by powerful uncommon forces.” He hesitated. “It’s a bit like what happened with Rosie.”

“Your sister?” Seb asked. “What do you mean?”

“Before I went to the Scouts’ Union I wrote Rosie’s name on the label of the Great Uncommon Bag to see if it would find her,” Valian explained. “The bag took me to Montroquer undermart in Paris, but Rosie wasn’t anywhere to be seen, so I tried the bag again and found myself in Mai Masima undermart in Thailand. After that it took me to undermarts in Germany, Lithuania and Portugal. It was like it couldn’t settle on one location.”

From the set of Valian’s jaw, Ivy could tell how frustrated he was. “Maybe we can mark on a map all the places the bag has taken you to so far, and see if they’re connected?” she suggested. “If we can find a pattern, we might be able to predict where Rosie will be next.”

Seb gave her a wary glance. She knew what he was thinking: there was a strong chance that Rosie might not even be alive; she'd gone missing so long ago, and in the Dead End too. After their own experiences in that place, Ivy knew how dangerous it was.

The three of them slowed as they came to the Market Cross. There was little evidence of yesterday's Timbermeal other than a few patches of flattened grass. Valian pointed to a dented old ice cream van standing on the edge of the green and they headed over.

The vehicle was decorated with advertisements for things to do in Lundinor. There were guided tours for the living—WALK THE WALLS OF THE GREAT UNDERMART OF LUNDINOR—and the dead—WALK THROUGH THE WALLS OF THE GREAT UNDERMART OF LUNDINOR—as well as suggestions for places to stay and awards for Lundinor's top restaurants.

At the rear of the van was a notice board covered with announcements from different guilds. Ivy paused to take a closer look. The top of every notice showed the guild's coat of arms, and below, the times and dates of the next guild meeting. The Ancient Order of Chestnut Roasters were due to vote for a new guild leader.

"Does every guild have a leader?" Ivy asked Valian, thinking uneasily of the Dirge.

"Yeah, that's the rule. They have the final word on any guild decisions. There's a fixed number of members too; a space only becomes available when someone has Departed."

That was why there were only six members of the Dirge, Ivy thought. The code name Wolfsbane could have been taken by several people before Selena Grimes started using it.

Seb read one of the notices. "So…are you in a scouts' guild?"

Valian scoffed. "No. You have to be invited by the other members."

Ivy searched for disappointment on his face. He caught her looking at him and shrugged. "I'm used to working on my own. Anyway, it's hard to feel lonely when you live in busy undermarts all year round."

"All year round?" Seb repeated. "But Lundinor's only open three times a year."

“There are hundreds of other undermarts around the world. When one closes, another one opens; there’s a kind of circuit.”

The lady behind the counter of the tourist information van had flowers in her fluffy brown hair. “There’s a Sir Clement museum,” she told them. “I haven’t sold any tickets for a long while, but I’m sure they’re still valid.” She rooted around in the van and reappeared with a small book of perforated paper tickets. “They’re half a grade each.”

Ivy couldn’t understand why the place didn’t have more visitors. The tourist information lady held out a patchy velvet glove expectantly. Ivy felt herself going red, realizing she meant to trade.

“Don’t look at me,” Valian said with a shrug. “That sundial cost me an arm and a leg—I’m broke.”

Ivy remembered the allowance Granma Sylvie had given her and got the purse out of her satchel. Ethel had said there was five grades’ worth of objects inside it, but Ivy wasn’t sure which item to pick. She hastily selected a china napkin holder and handed it over.

The lady examined it carefully. “Hmm. Let’s check the current market grade.” She took a stainless-steel fork off the counter and, very gently, tapped the prongs against the side of the napkin holder. A clear, high-pitched chime rang out and, as the sound died away, Ivy caught a number being sung: *“One point eight.”*

“Excellent. That’ll do nicely.” The lady smiled and shook Ivy’s hand.

Ivy’s wrist went weak. This was it: her first Trade. She was now as much an uncommoner as anyone in Lundinor. She didn’t have long to dwell on the moment.

“The museum is in Sir Clement’s old house, high up in the West End,” the lady told her. She scribbled the directions down on a piece of paper and handed it over. “Have fun!”

To reach the West End the three friends had to walk through a huge archway of flowers that spelled out the words THE BEST END. Once inside, Ivy didn’t know where to look first. White pavilions bordered gleaming marble courtyards and lawns so neat and green, the grass could have been made of plastic. People in huge Hobsmatch hats strolled around carrying parasols and walking tiny dogs, while others sat at tables, sipping tea and nibbling fancy cakes. Ivy noticed several underguards erecting temporary street bells directing people to the Grivens stadium. Preparations for the big contest were already under way.

"Well, it's exactly where that lady said it would be," Valian said, craning his neck. "High up."

In front of them stood the biggest tree Ivy had ever seen—the trunk was as wide as a car, and the branches reached so high, the top wasn't visible.

Seb screwed up his nose, peering into the dark canopy. "There's a museum in there?"

Ivy looked closer. Nestled between the branches were some wooden platforms, with rickety rope ladders and bridges made of chain and driftwood. A long sign had been nailed to the rough brown bark.

THE GREAT OAK TREE

LEVEL 1: *Cog & Caster, wheelmongers*
LEVEL 2: *François Filigree's Furniture Jamboree (also former residence of Sir Clement)*
LEVEL 3: *Muddled Melodies—uncommon objects with musical means*

The list continued to Level 21, but Ivy's attention had already focused upon something. *"François Filigree,"* she read. "I've seen that name before—yesterday, at the Timbermeal. It was written on that patio chair you were sitting on."

A varnished wooden staircase spiraled up around the trunk. After fifty steps or so they reached a large, wide platform set among the branches. On it stood a forest of black iron spindles—some as tall as a door, others the size of cotton reels. Each spindle was stacked with a different type of wheel; there were brightly colored skateboard wheels, wooden cartwheels, bicycle wheels and supermarket shopping cart wheels, among others.

"Turn your life around with a new uncommon wheel!" called a voice from somewhere behind them. "Best quality in Lundinor!"

Valian growled and sped up. "Quick—we haven't time to talk."

As they climbed the next set of stairs, the foliage of the Great Oak Tree grew denser and more tangled. Eventually the noises from the street below were muffled and it became so dark that uncommon lemon squeezers had been fixed to the branches to light the way.

"Whoa!" Ivy exclaimed, coming to a halt. In front of her, the stairs turned into a rickety rope bridge, crossing over to the other side of the tree. On each side hung nets topped with an assortment of chairs and tables piled up on top of one another as if they were about to be used in a bonfire. At the sound of Ivy's voice, they started shuffling around, kicking their legs and jostling for attention.

"The way's blocked," Valian said, pointing to a tangle of thorny branches in the middle of the bridge.

Seb pulled out his drumsticks. "Not for long."

"Careful," Ivy said, laying a hand on his arm. "It's still part of the tree."

Seb thrashed his drumsticks through the air, aiming at the thicket. There was a loud crunch as, with an explosion of leaves and splinters, a hole appeared in the center.

They continued over the bridge in single file. Halfway across, Ivy heard a voice:

"Helloooo there! Are you on your way to François Filigree's Furniture Jamboree?"

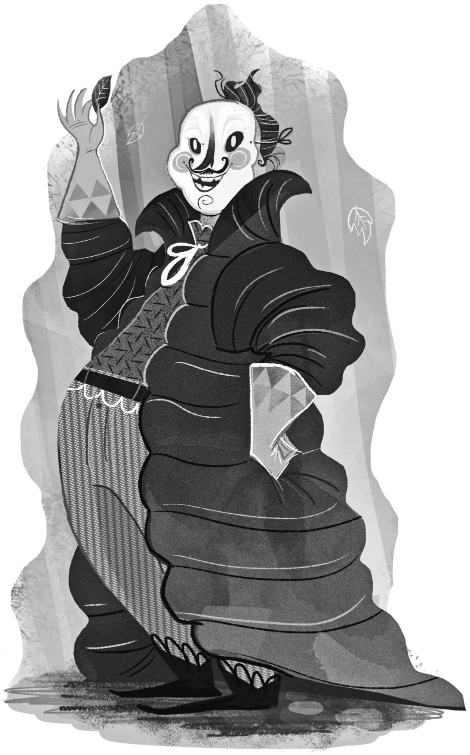
She stopped, gripping the rope rail tightly and looking around. She couldn't see anyone. "Um, actually we want to visit the museum at Sir Clement's old house."

"Oh," the voice said. "You're not lost, then?"

Ivy nudged Valian. "I don't know….*Are* we?"

There was a shuffling noise behind them, and a short, dumpy man dropped out of the branches, bounced onto the net and somersaulted over them onto the end of the bridge.

"Most people who wind up in my shop are lost," François Filigree said in a sad voice, brushing down his long purple overcoat with a pair of thick, fire-retardant gloves. He had a small pear-shaped body with virtually no neck, and tiny arms and legs. Covering his face was a smooth white porcelain mask with small eye holes, painted lips and a black mustache.



He must have caught Ivy staring at it because he said, “It’s from Japanese Noh theater. Excellent Hobsmatch, of course. There aren’t many people who dare to wear them, so I really do stand out.”

“Yeah…see what you mean,” Seb said slowly. He edged up behind Valian, his knuckles white on the rope. “Er—the museum?”

“Right…” François Filigree’s shoulders sagged. “Have you got tickets?”

Ivy felt around in the pocket of her new jacket. “Yes.”

“Then I’ll show you the way,” he said, sounding dejected. “Come in, come in.”

He led them on a twisting route, past a graveyard of broken table legs and more cluttered bridges, to a ramshackle multistory tree house. The walls were covered with holey strips of moldy bark, and thick spiderwebs filled the empty window frames. Crumbling chimneys, crooked roofs and half-demolished balconies poked out of the dark green leaves.

“Leave your tickets on the table inside,” François Filigree told them.

“*This* is the museum?” Ivy exclaimed.

He tilted his strange white mask. “I understand that it might look a little unloved, but there are plenty of Sir Clement’s original possessions to check out inside, along with a few of my own knickknacks. Everything’s for sale; let me know if you want to strike a deal!”

Ivy climbed the dusty steps toward the front door.

“Careful,” Filigree warned, batting a branch away from her hand.

She felt her left glove catch on something as she withdrew it. A small hole had appeared in the thumb.

Filigree winced. “Ah, sorry; the tree grows at such a rate.”

As he bounded off, Ivy poked her thumb, assessing the hole. Seb yanked on the handle of the tree house door and a cloud of dust puffed out. “This place can’t have had any visitors for years.”

“I’m guessing access was difficult,” Valian said drily. “I don’t know why Filigree doesn’t cut things back. It’s almost like he doesn’t want customers.”

The entrance hall was covered in vines and weeds. A solitary stool tottered in one corner and a cracked ladder hung down in the center, leading to the upper floors.

“We’d better split up to save time.” Valian jumped for a rung on the ladder and pulled himself up. “I’ll search upstairs. Let me know if you find anything down here.”

Seb walked over to a rectangular hole in the wall, which had clearly once been a doorway. “Here goes,” he said, ducking under what was left of the rotting frame.

Ivy followed him through. The room beyond was decorated with sun-bleached maps and vintage posters, and the air smelled musty and dank. A balding velvet couch rested against one wall and a moth-eaten Chinese rug covered the floor. Ivy examined one of the sideboards, which displayed a selection of objects labeled with price tags. “François’s collection,” she said, wiping the dust off a box containing a spun-glass paperweight.

"Any sign of the smoking hourglass?" Seb stood on tiptoe, looking into the rafters. "Or anything to do with mixology or the Rasavatum?"

Ivy spotted a checkered wooden board set with marble chess pieces. Or at least, she *thought* they were chess pieces. She read the label: ORIGINAL 1604 GRIVENS SET—7.4 GRADE.

"Know what that reminds me of?" Seb said, appearing at her shoulder. "Toenails." He reached for a tarnished silver photo frame by her elbow. *"Rare Victorian photo frame, circa 1879,"* he read out loud from the tag. *"Frames an image by a minute either side—5.6 grade."*

Ivy frowned. "What do you think that means?"

"Dunno. Maybe it changes the way a photo appears somehow."

Ivy thought of the postcard of Granma Sylvie and Selena. She'd hidden it under her mattress before leaving the Cabbage Moon that morning. "Do you think the frame could tell us who Jack-in-the-Green burned off that postcard?"

"It's worth a try," Seb said with a shrug. "Do you have enough grade to trade for it?"

Ivy shook her head. She'd spent 1.8 getting them tickets for the museum.

Seb turned out the pockets of his jeans, but all he found were a few feathers and his phone, which he swiftly clutched to his chest. "Er…no."

"The only other uncommon thing I have to trade is Scratch," Ivy said. "And there's no way that's happening."

"We'll have to ask Valian," Seb decided, his mouth curling in disappointment. He tucked the frame under his arm. "Keep looking for Rasavatum clues."

Ivy studied the faded posters on the walls. One promoted the opening of the West End of Lundinor: MARVEL AT THE WEST END, LUNDINOR'S GRAND NEW SPACE FOR TRADERS! The watercolor painting in the center depicted children playing with hoops and sticks, running on a green lawn beside a row of striped pavilions. "Seb, how much do you remember of that nursery rhyme?"

"A little bit," he said. "It starts: *The 'vatum men come a-hunting to town.*"

“Yeah…” Ivy’s mum had once told her that nursery rhymes sometimes had hidden meanings. “It doesn’t say what they were hunting for, though, does it?”

Scratch vibrated within her satchel. “Repeating rhyme to Ivys can nursery!” he announced proudly as she scooped him out. “Memory excellent Scratch.”

Ivy hugged him. *Of course*. He’d been in her bag when they’d first heard the rhyme. She hurriedly got out a pen and paper. “OK, Scratch, go slowly.”

Once he had finished, Ivy read the rhyme back carefully, trying to identify something they might have missed, but the poem only echoed the story Ethel had already told them.

There was a creak above her head, and more dust fell down onto the sideboard. Ivy was about to brush it off her piece of paper when she noticed that only some of the words were now visible. “Wait…What if we’re reading it wrong? What if only certain lines are important?”

Seb scanned the page a few times, reading the poem through in his head. “The only pattern that makes sense is if you take the first line from the first verse and the second line from the second verse and so on….”

Ivy tried it, reading aloud: *“The ’vatum men come a-hunting to town…for five wonders of light…more powerful than e’er before…and lock the secret door, the door, and lock the secret door.”* Her skin prickled. “Seb, it works!”

“Yeah, but what does it mean?”

Ivy’s voice went hollow. “Oh no. The Rasavatum were searching for *five wonders more powerful than ever before*….That can only be one thing—the Great Uncommon Good!”

Seb’s eyes widened. “If the Rasavatum were hunting for the Great Uncommon Good even before the Dirge, that might be why the Dirge recruited them.”

“And it would explain why a formula from the smoking-hourglass notebook would help Jack-in-the-Green find the Jar of Shadows,” Ivy added. “It must have belonged to a member of the Rasavatum who was searching for it.”

A tremor ran along the floorboards and Valian appeared in the doorway. “There’s nothing useful up there,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Have you had any luck?”

“Ivy found a secret message in that nursery rhyme,” Seb explained. “Also, we’re buying this.” He held up the silver photo frame. “Except that neither of us has enough grade to trade Filigree for it, so”—he grinned—“we’ll owe you….”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The second she poked her head out of the Great Uncommon Bag, Ivy spied Judy's roller skates. "Judy!" Her mind raced to find an explanation as she crawled out onto the floor of their room in the Cabbage Moon. "Er…this isn't what it looks like…."

Judy stared at the sack by Ivy's feet. She was wearing an apron over her waistcoat-tutu combo, and in one hand held a rustling brown feather duster. As Ivy clambered to her feet, the duster gave a noisy *squawk*, which seemed to bring Judy out of her stupor.

"Ivy? What's going on? How are you bag-traveling in here?" She opened her mouth to say more, but was cut off by a loud scratch and thump over Ivy's shoulder. Valian and Seb appeared through the opening of the Great Uncommon Bag in quick succession.

"I knew no one would see us leaving that overgrown tree," Valian said, dusting off his knees as he got up. Seb threw a hand over his mouth and staggered to the open window, mumbling something about fresh air.

The feather duster squawked again, attracting both boys' attention.

"What's going on?" Judy demanded, putting her hands on her hips. "You're breaking GUT law by using that thing. You'll get Mr. Littlefair into trouble."

The duster screeched loudly. "Breaking the law, breaking the law."

Judy frowned. "I don't understand—uncommon bags don't work inside undermarts. Is there something special about this one?"

"Special about this one," the duster wailed. "Special about this one."

Seb hastily slid the window closed. “Can you ask that thing to be quiet?”

Judy stuffed it in among the mesh of her tutu without taking her eyes off them. “Look, if you’re in some kind of trouble, just tell me. I might be able to help.”

Ivy knew they weren’t meant to be trusting anyone, but she couldn’t think of an explanation that Judy would believe—apart from the truth. Plus, it would be good to have someone else to talk to about what was really going on. “Maybe we *should* tell her,” she suggested nervously.

Seb smiled at Judy. “OK by me.”

Valian narrowed his eyes, his expression switching from anger to mild annoyance. Eventually his shoulders slumped. “Fine,” he told Judy. “But you’re not going to like it.”

Judy hid the feather duster in the wardrobe to keep it quiet, and as the bearskin rug lay snoring in the corner of the room, Ivy, Seb and Valian recounted everything that had happened last winter.

She rolled anxiously back and forth on her roller skates. “Ivy’s a whisperer….You own one of the Great Uncommon Good….Valian fought wraithmoths in the Wrench basement….You played Grivens with Jack-in-the-Green!” She shook her head. “What’s next?”

“Well, we’re hoping to use this,” Ivy said, slipping the silver photo frame from her satchel.

Seb lifted her mattress and pulled out the postcard. “We think that whoever’s missing from the photo can tell us more about Selena’s past and her connection with our granma.”

“Let’s have a look at them both,” Judy said.

Seb passed her the postcard, Ivy the photo frame. Judy teased the back of the frame away and tucked the postcard facedown inside so that the photo would appear on the front.

Ivy watched her curiously. “Have you used one before?”

“No,” Judy admitted, “but whenever I have to use something uncommon that I’m not sure about, I just act as if it was a common version and hope for the best.”

At first nothing happened. Ivy drew closer to Judy and studied the image. Granma Sylvie and Selena Grimes were standing on a cobbled road with a redbrick wall behind them.

"Uh, guys?" Seb asked. "Are you seeing that?"

Ivy looked up and realized that something had happened to their room. She could still see the walls and floor, but the duck-egg-blue wardrobe and bedside chair were slightly faded. If she turned her head, the wooden floor appeared to be made of cobblestones, and the walls flickered between sunflower wallpaper and red bricks. Ivy squinted. It was a bit like looking at a hologram. From one angle she saw their room, but from another she saw the eerie setting of the photo. "Are we inside the photo somehow?"

Valian tilted his head. "I don't think so. It's more like the photo's being projected around us."

Ivy heard muffled footsteps, and a girl with golden hair came running through the bedroom wall and across the cobbles. The four of them shuffled back to the edges of the room, but Ivy was too slow and the girl ran straight through her—as if she was made of nothing but air.

"Is that *Granma*?" Seb asked.

The young girl *was* Granma Sylvie. Ivy could tell by the shape of her face and her amber eyes. She was wearing the same Hobsmatch as in the photo—a frilly white petticoat, a denim shirt and silver go-go boots. Ivy waved a hand in front of her, but the young Sylvie remained oblivious.

"It's like some sort of recording," she decided. "Remember: it frames the picture by one minute either side. I think right now we're seeing the minute before the photo was taken."

Young Sylvie cupped her hands around her mouth. "Come on, Lena!" she called in the direction she'd just come from. "We've got to be quick—the door only appears for a few minutes; that's why it's a *secret* sweetshop!"

A second girl came racing into the room. The young Selena Grimes had freckles over her pale nose, and her dark braid swung behind her shoulders as she ran. Ivy shivered; it was disconcerting to see her with so much life in her cheeks. “Sylvie, hang on!” Selena panted. “I promised we’d wait for Amos.”

“Amos *Stirling*?” Young Sylvie put her hands on her hips. “He *likes* you.”

“What do you mean?” Selena asked, smoothing down her dress. She was wearing a gray pinafore over a silver blouse, with long Victorian leather riding boots laced up to the knee.

Sylvie giggled. “You *know* what I mean. He’s always asking questions about you, following you around. He *likes* you.”

Selena blushed. “Well, he’s never said anything to me.” She flashed her bare fingers while adjusting her black satin gloves. Her hands were not yet riddled with maggots. Ivy couldn’t believe this was the person who would grow up to join the Dirge and become Wolfsbane.

“Selena’s still touching the ground; she hasn’t become a ghoul yet,” Seb commented.

“What do you think came first,” Valian said, “Selena dying or her joining the Dirge?”

Ivy did the math. “They must have both happened sometime between when this photo was taken and when the Dirge were last seen on Twelfth Night 1969.”

A tall boy with a mop of jet-black hair came hurrying into the room. He was wearing a white shirt, navy breeches and polished black brogues. “Lena—sorry I got held up.” He was well-spoken and looked a few years older than Sylvie and Selena.

Seb pointed at the boy’s shoes. “They’re identical to the shoe in the photo!”

Amos was clutching a leather-bound book to his chest.

“What’s that?” Sylvie asked, tilting her head. “Don’t tell me you brought *homework*?”

Amos reddened. “No, it’s just my journal. I take it everywhere. You never know when you’ll need to write down a new mixology formula.”

“You’re a mixologist?” Sylvie’s face brightened. “That’s so interesting! I know what you mean about the journal—it’s the same with this….” She pulled a snow globe out of her pocket. “I want to be a photographer, so it’s important to carry it on me at all times.” She grinned. “Hey, let’s get a picture now! I can take before and after shots.” She set the snow globe on top of a fence post by the brick wall, then huddled between Amos and Selena.

“Say ‘Uncommon Cheese,’ ” she called.

“UNCOMMON CHEESE!”

The snow globe vibrated, and a puff of tiny snowflakes shot out of it. Sylvie stepped forward, removed the globe from the post and peered inside. “Looks great,” she declared, showing the other two.

As Amos put his journal in his other hand, Ivy gasped. Embossed onto the dark leather cover were the familiar lines of the smoking hourglass.

The notebook! It was the same one.

Judy flinched, allowing the frame to slip from her fingers. As she fumbled to catch it, Amos, Sylvie and Selena swiftly disappeared and the room returned to normal.

Ivy retrieved the notebook from her satchel urgently. “*That’s* why the initials *AS* are written on every page,” she said, running her fingers across the cover. “They stand for Amos Stirling. This isn’t just a notebook; it’s his *journal*.”

“He said he was into mixology,” Seb commented. “Do you think he was a member of the Rasavatum? That might explain why the smoking hourglass is on the front.”

“But it still doesn’t tell us why Selena would want to remove him from the postcard,” Valian pointed out. “Or help us understand how we might use the journal to find the Jar of Shadows.”

Ivy opened the journal and flicked through the blank pages. She could sense a soul trapped within it somewhere, but the pages didn’t feel warm and tingly. “We need to find out what happened to Amos. On the postcard he mentioned that he’d been forced into hiding. Did he ever come out? Did he see Granma Sylvie again?”

Judy opened the wardrobe door and retrieved the feather duster, which began squawking. “I’ve got an idea that might help,” she said. “We just can’t do it while my mum’s around. She takes a lunch break at two p.m. Meet me at the featherlight mailhouse then.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Granma Sylvie slid onto the bench opposite Ivy, Seb and Valian, placing a bowl of soup on the table. All around, the dining room throbbed with activity—families chatting at tables, people serving drinks and collecting plates. The air smelled like a better version of Ivy's school canteen—gravy and roast meat without the stark after-smell of disinfectant.

"I hoped I'd catch you three in here," she said, smiling. "I checked your room before I left this morning, but you were both still asleep. And I used that pepper pot yesterday afternoon. You were buying ice cream, I think."

The tourist information bureau. That had been lucky; if Granma Sylvie had looked in on them at any other time of the day, the scene would have been far more incriminating.

"What are you doing here?" Seb asked, looking up from his chicken sandwich. "I thought you'd still be at the mansion."

"I've only come back briefly," Granma Sylvie explained. "Ethel made the underguard agree to give us a lunch break. We began cataloging the first floor this morning; then it's the study and the library, and finally the third-floor bedrooms." She examined Ivy's jacket and red neck scarf. "Hobsmatch?"

Ivy brushed down her dungarees, smiling. "You like it?"

"It suits you."

Granma Sylvie's outfit was similar to the one she'd been wearing yesterday—a stiff pencil skirt and crisp blouse.

Ivy hesitated before saying, "I have to ask you something; it's about the postcard again."

Granma Sylvie straightened. "Fire away."

"Is the name Amos Stirling familiar?"

"Amos Stirling…" She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I've never heard it before."

Ivy looked at the others, her shoulders slumping. If only Granma Sylvie could remember.

Outside, Ivy peeled off her jacket and stuffed it into her satchel.

"It's heating up," Valian said, pulling a newspaper out from under his arm.

"Tell me about it." Seb's mandarin coat was tied around his waist.

"Not the temperature," Valian groaned. "The Grivens contest." He showed them the newspaper: the contest was the top story, splashed across the front page. "Famous players have been arriving from all over the world where the game is still played legally. Late last night four people drank from the contest master's cup and two again this morning. Add those to the other four who've already entered, and we have ten contestants so far."

The photo accompanying the main article showed a man with a chiseled jaw and slick black hair taking a sip from a huge brass cup. He was surrounded by snow globe photographers and screaming fans. Ivy swallowed, trying to dispel the bitter taste at the back of her throat. If they wanted to stop the Dirge from opening the Jar of Shadows at the contest, they were running out of time.

Hearing a clatter across the street, she glanced around. Brewster's Alehouse was packed, as always—revelers released flaming burps as they lounged at picnic tables outside. Ivy spied a scrawny figure hunched over a row of metal bins in the alley beside the building.

Alexander Brewster. He swayed on the spot, a mountain of bulging bin bags in his arms. His thin legs wobbled as he took a step….

"Hold on!" she called, hurrying over.

Alexander’s pale face poked out from behind the black bags. “I think I’ve picked up too many,” he fretted.

Ivy grabbed the top bag, and together they unloaded the rest into the dustbins.

“There’s no time to take the rubbish out,” Alexander said, sighing once they’d finished. “We’re so busy that Pa is having to whip up batches of Dragon’s Brew overnight. Every day we’re selling out.”

Ivy brushed her hands clean on her dungarees. “That’s good, isn’t it?” she said. “It’s a great achievement. Everyone wants your dad’s ale.”

Alexander’s mouth twitched. “I guess.” He set the last lid back on a dustbin. “Thanks for helping, er…”

Ivy held out her hand. “It’s Ivy—Ivy Sparrow.”

He shook it with old leather gloves the color of oxblood.

Ivy helped him collect the glasses from the outside tables before wishing him luck with the rest of his shift and going back to join Seb and Valian. The featherlight mailhouse was only a short walk away.

“Isn’t this better than skyriding?” Seb asked as they came to a fork road off the Gauntlet. “We have our feet on the ground, our lunch still in our stomachs….”

Standing on the corner in front of them was a dilapidated wooden hut. A mosaic sign propped up behind the dusty window said POTTER’S POINT. The weedy garden was packed with eager customers and stallholders selling empty plant pots of all different shapes and materials—terra-cotta, plastic, glazed pottery and glass.

As Ivy searched for some indication of what they did, her eyes picked out a face among the shoppers and she froze. “No way…” She pointed with a shaky hand. “Is that…?” She was too shocked to finish the question.

Seb followed the line of her finger and his brow crinkled. “The chief officer of the *Outlander* ship?”

Ivy examined the man’s features carefully, making doubly sure that it was the same person. *White line through his eyebrow, curly blond beard…*“It’s definitely him,” she decided. “I don’t understand—he’s *dead*.”

Valian narrowed his eyes. “We have to follow him. Judy can wait.”

Head down, the chief officer shuffled away from the plant-pot sellers, his hands in the pockets of his smart black uniform. As he turned toward the East End, Ivy, Seb and Valian kept their distance, using trees and clusters of crowd as cover. The shabby quarter had undergone a spring transformation into a patchy forest of silver birch trees, complete with ramshackle cottage shops and ragged tents. Scarlet toadstools poked out of the ferns in the undergrowth, and wind rustled through the spindly branches.

The traders here all wore a similar style—their Hobsmatch was Victorian and tatty: mud-stained tailcoats, threadbare trousers and moth-eaten petticoats were the favored choices.

The chief officer emerged from the forest at the edge of a vast swamp. Ivy squinted into the thick white mist. Small groups of men and women sat fishing in the tall reeds. In the distance, on the far bank, lay the misshapen silhouettes of shepherds’ huts. The chief officer trudged around the swamp and entered a green hut, third along from the left. There were dim lights on inside.

Ivy approached one of the fishermen. “Excuse me,” she asked politely, “do you know whose hut that is?”

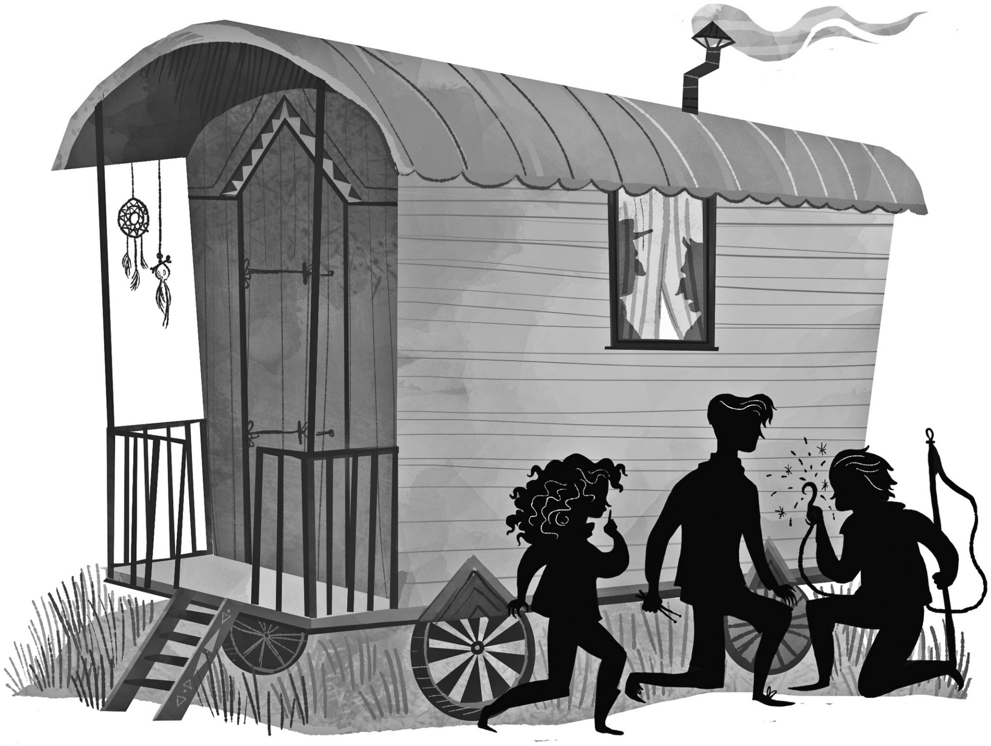
The fisherman lifted his cap to see. “The green one? Not sure, love, sorry.” Ivy was about to step away when he added, “Only two fellas have gone inside since I got ’ere, and that was hours ago. Both of ’em were dead: one sticky and yellow; the other ’ad an extra arm.”

Ivy had a horrible feeling she had met those two characters before. “Why is the chief officer meeting *them*?” she asked Seb and Valian.

Valian glanced at the fisherman’s rod. “Can I borrow that for a minute? I’ll owe you one grade.”

The man shrugged and shook his hand. “I haven’t caught a bite for a while anyway.”

Valian took the rod and started around the edge of the swamp. “Come on—we can use this rod to find out what’s being said inside.”



They snuck up to the green hut, ready to spring into action. The frilly curtains at the windows were all drawn, but smoke rose steadily from the chimney.

“Uncommon fishing rods catch bites,” Valian explained, keeping his voice low. “It can be a bite of anything: cake, data…even a bite of conversation.” He raised the rod toward the chimney and lowered the hook into the smoke. In seconds, something was tugging on the line. Carefully Valian reeled it in toward where they were crouching. A set of voices emerged from the hook as if it was a speaker:

“Glad you got my message,” one said. It sounded like Mick the Stretch. “I received your payment. Here’s what you asked for: coordinates for where my sources think this jar of yours is being hidden.”

There was a pause, then another familiar voice. “*There?* How did you find it?”

Jack-in-the-Green. Ivy shivered.

“Squasher’s friendly with one of the guards,” Mick answered. “The jar was smuggled in there last night.”

Suddenly the front door of the shepherd's hut swung open and Jack-in-the-Green stepped out. Valian lowered the fishing rod onto the ground, and they all ducked.

Huge yellow eyes scanned the mist over the swamp. Jack-in-the-Green adjusted his emerald suit before taking a feather out of its pocket. Ivy squinted, desperately trying to make out what he was writing, but only one word at the top was clear: *Selena.*

"He's sending her the coordinates," Valian hissed.

To Ivy's annoyance, the broken soul of one of the dead flitted into her ear, making her skin prickle. She tried to ignore it, but it was close by….

Jack-in-the-Green suddenly shook himself like a dog with wet fur. In an instant, the seven-foot green-skinned creature was transformed into a man with a curly blond beard. The chief officer of the MV *Outlander.*

Ivy, Seb and Valian remained quite still until he had tramped most of the way back around the swamp. Then, very quietly, they left their hiding place and began to trek after him. Ivy sensed the dead creature start to move too, following.

"We've got to get those coordinates," Valian said. "If the Jar of Shadows—"

"Shh," Ivy hushed, raising a finger to her lips. "There's someone else here." She tried reaching out with her whispering, this time focusing on her immediate surroundings. Perhaps all the adrenaline running through her system had sharpened her senses—because it worked: she could pinpoint the presence of one of the dead approaching through the long grass. She spun on her heels and stamped into the bog.

"Ouch!" cried a shrill voice. A wobbly red and blue jester's hat loomed out of the shadows. "What do you think I am? An ant?" Johnny Hands had a scowl on his face and a hand to his chest.

Ivy squared her shoulders. "You were following us! And you were hiding outside the shepherd's hut."

Johnny Hands folded his arms. "What if I was? A ghoul has to work. There are several parties interested in Jack-in-the-Green's whereabouts, I'll have you know. I don't suppose you saw what he wrote in that featherlight…? My patron would be very interested to find out."

Ivy narrowed her eyes, wondering who Johnny Hands’s patron was. Still, if Johnny was spying on Jack-in-the-Green, at least he wasn’t working for the Dirge.

“I can pay you for the information,” he added. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a candy-pink plastic yo-yo.

Ivy gasped. “But that’s *mine*!” The yo-yo had saved her life on several occasions. She hadn’t forgotten the confident feeling it gave her.

“I’m afraid, my dear, that it *was* yours,” Johnny Hands said. “You lost it and I claimed it. Uncommoners pretty much invented ‘finders keepers.’ ”

“What will you trade for it?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“I’m only exchanging it for one thing,” Johnny Hands told her. “The contents of that featherlight.”

Ivy kept her face blank. There *was* a way to intercept featherlight messages, she knew. “The yo-yo first, then I’ll tell you what was in that message.”

Johnny Hands smirked. “The message first, then I’ll hand over the yo-yo.” He held out a gloved hand.

“I don’t technically have the message yet,” Ivy admitted. “We’re on our way to get it. Do we have a deal or not?”

Johnny Hands’s dark-ringed eyes narrowed. “Well played, Ivy Sparrow.” He shook her hand and slammed the yo-yo into her palm. “But I’m coming with you.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The tall, wobbly brick tower of the featherlight mailhouse was now covered in dark vines, and there was moss on the tiled roof. Multicolored feathers of different sizes flew in and out of the building through teacup-sized holes.

Judy was waiting outside when they arrived, one roller skate resting up against the mailhouse wall. “You’re late—what happened?” She spied Johnny Hands. “Oh.”

“Glorious to meet you too, my dear,” he said, tipping his jester’s hat in her direction.

“He’s going to wait outside,” Seb explained in a strained voice.

Johnny Hands muttered something that sounded like “Rude” before gliding off.

Judy led Ivy, Seb and Valian into a small circular room at the bottom of the mailhouse. The last time Ivy had seen it, her great-uncle Cartimore Wrench—aka Ragwort—was living there, and it had reeked of unwashed clothes, rotting apple cores and filth. Now the space was clean and bright, and the air smelled of ladies’ perfume and coffee. Jars filled with different feathers were arranged on shelves, each labeled with neat handwriting. Ivy read, among others, *Long-Haul Albatross, Quick-Noting Pigeon* and *Send-a-Song Nightingale.*

“There’s no time to explain, but we need you to intercept a featherlight for us,” Ivy told Judy hurriedly. “Can you do that?”

“Er—technically yes, but my mum will kill me.”

“It was sent a few minutes ago to Selena Grimes,” Seb added. “We think it gave the location of the Jar of Shadows.”

Judy frowned. “I see. I’ll try my best. Do you know what feather he used?”

“Greeny yellow with a fluffy gray tip,” Valian said. “I memorized it.”

She nodded. “Sounds like parakeet. We’ll need to go upstairs; you can help.”

A set of winding timber stairs led them to the top of the tower.

“I’m afraid it’s bad news about Amos Stirling,” Judy said as they climbed. “I sent him a featherlight with a special long-distance feather—it would have found him anywhere. But…it didn’t even leave the mailhouse.”

“So he’s Departed,” Valian said. “They’re the only people you can’t send messages to. When they’re gone, they’re gone. I’ve tried it with Rosie. The feathers always leave. That’s how I know she’s still alive.”

Ivy turned around. “You *know* Rosie’s alive? Why didn’t you say so?”

Valian blinked. “Of *course* she’s alive. Did you think it was just wishful thinking? Why would I have been looking for her all this time if she was…” He shook his head without finishing.

“Valian, we’re sorry,” Seb said behind them. “We should have had more faith. We’ll help you find her when this is over, we promise.”

Judy called down from the top of the stairs. “Come on, we haven’t got long!”

An even smaller room sat beneath the circular roof. The floor was carpeted in fluffy down, which whirled into the air every time the tower shifted.

“The only way to intercept the message—if it hasn’t already been received—is to call all traveling feathers back here,” Judy explained. “Between us, we’ll have to grab any parakeet ones that come in, and then resend the others. It will only amount to a short delay for most messages; I doubt anyone will notice.” She cringed. “Except my mum, but I’ll deal with her later.”

Judy unhooked a horn hanging in the middle of the room and put it to her lips. Ivy expected to hear an ear-piercing sound, but when Judy puffed out her cheeks and blew, she heard nothing at all.

“Quickly,” Judy instructed, hanging the horn back up. “Stand by the holes. Get ready to catch anything green. It’s easier than it sounds; you just need to be focused.”

Ivy stood by six holes, arms outstretched. For thirty seconds or so nothing happened, and then a storm of dull *thuds* encircled the roof and feathers began swooping in through every hole.

“Grab them!” Valian yelled.

Ivy caught the first two by mistake—they weren’t even green—and dropped them onto the floor. She shook her head, trying to concentrate.

“Got one!” Seb shouted over her shoulder.

“It’ll only last a few…more…seconds,” Judy called, her voice strained.

The thudding stopped abruptly and the air cleared. Ivy turned around empty-handed, looking disappointed. “I didn’t get any—sorry.”

Judy and Seb were holding one green feather each; Valian had a peacock plume. When he saw everyone staring at it with quizzical expressions, he gave a thin smile and dropped it onto the pillow of feathers at his feet. “Similar color. My mistake.”

“You open the message like this,” Judy told Seb, stroking her green feather backward—from tip to quill. With a quick swish, it wrote a short message in the air.

> *Dear Cecil,*
>
> *You won’t believe this, but they’ve got one of those sports commentary bells in…*

Ivy shook her head. “It’s not that one.”

Judy snatched back the feather and ran her fingers along it in the opposite direction. It immediately disappeared with a tiny puff. “Seb, try yours.”

Seb was holding his feather as if it was a priceless sword, balancing it between both palms. Taking a breath, he stroked it as Judy had instructed and it began to write:

> Selena Grimes,
>
> Griddlex-gump, gallen-glow, murdle-pop, saddle-blow…

Ivy's senses prickled. "That's it! But…what does that mean? It's nonsense."

Valian stepped closer, watching the feather write two more lines. After it had finished, it bounced gently on the spot, the text glowing with a faint golden light. "Looks like Dead Man's Code," he said. "It's an ancient language the dead developed in order to keep secrets from the living."

Judy examined the message. "My mum had to study Dead Man's Code to be mailmaster. She taught me how to read it." Her eyes widened as they followed the writing. "The Jar of Shadows is being hidden…." She put a hand to her mouth before continuing to read faster. "Jack-in-the-Green asks Selena to join him there this afternoon to search for it together!"

"So," Valian said, "where is it?"

Judy grabbed the green feather, stroking it quill to tip so it vanished. "Sorry—if Selena doesn't receive the feather soon, Jack-in-the-Green will know it was intercepted," she explained. "He might come here for my mum."

"Good thinking," Seb told her. "Er…where is the Jar of Shadows?"

Judy knelt down and began stroking each of the feathers, sending them back on their way with a little puff every time. "You can't go there. It's too dangerous."

Ivy crouched to help her. "Judy, we have to," she said firmly. "Someone's got to stop the Dirge from getting their hands on the jar. The lives of all the uncommoners in Lundinor are at stake. You've got to tell us."

Judy sighed. "It's hidden in the Skaptikon."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Wait…that 'living nightmares' place?" Seb asked. "How are we going to search fo—?"

He was cut off by a loud crackle as Johnny Hands floated *through* the roof and hovered in the middle of the room. "Visiting the Skaptikon is not like going on some jolly holiday," he declared in a deep voice. "Don't be fools."

Ivy fell onto her bottom. "You were listening!"

"Of course I was listening." He stared at them. "You *can't* go to the Skaptikon. The less said about that place, the better. It still gives me nightmares, and I don't even *sleep*."

Valian cocked his head. "Hold on…you've *been* to the Skaptikon?"

Johnny Hands rubbed his gloves together nervously. "Not as a prisoner, but I was there when they built it. The IUC recruited me to test it out."

*The International Uncommon Council…*Ivy didn't know what to say. Testing the Skaptikon couldn't have been a pleasant experience.

"One of the designers once told me that the way to fight the Skaptikon was to beat it at its own game. To fool it, like it fools you." He shook his head. "Of course, he also said that old socks made great tea bags, so who knows?"

Valian said, "So you're saying there *could* be a way to get into the Skaptikon safely?"

Johnny Hands raised a scruffy eyebrow. “My dear boy, like I said, the Skaptikon is no place for a jolly holiday. It has its own atmosphere inside—not even gravity behaves in the same way. It’s all back to front and upside down.”

*Back to front…*Ivy knew someone who saw the whole world that way.

“Anyway, this is a pointless conversation,” Johnny Hands said, fixing his jester’s hat tightly over his straggly hair. “Even if you find the place, it’s deep, deep below Lundinor. You’d never get in or out undetected.” He began dissolving back through the rafters. “I’ve got to alert my patron with this information. Till our paths cross again, Ivy Sparrow!”

Once he’d gone, Ivy, Seb and Valian were quiet for a moment, then Valian pulled the Great Uncommon Bag out from under his jacket.

Judy looked up. “You can’t be serious.”

“If we leave now,” Valian said, “we might have a head start. Selena can have only just received Jack-in-the-Green’s featherlight.”

“I think Scratch might be able to help us when we’re inside,” Ivy suggested, stuffing him into the left pocket of her dungarees, and her yo-yo into the right.

Seb pulled on his mandarin coat, stowing his drumsticks within.

Judy’s mouth fell open. “You’re all stupid,” she said. Her eyes lingered on Seb. “Braver than anyone I’ve ever met…but still totally stupid.”

Ivy wasn’t sure where her earlier surge of confidence had come from, but once she’d crawled out of the Great Uncommon Bag and into the Skaptikon it swiftly left her.

At once her ears were assaulted by noises: a roaring wind, the distant clang of metal bars and incoherent shouting. The sounds seemed to permeate right through her skull, stifling her thoughts and blurring her vision. “Argh—” She rubbed her temples as a hand pulled her up off the cold stone floor.

“Just stay still,” Valian said, his voice trembling. “It gets a bit better after a minute or so.”

They were in a windowless room about the size of a changing cubicle. The air was warm, as if they were standing close to an open fire.

“The Skaptikon is messing with our senses.” Valian was shivering. Ivy reached out to him; his skin was like ice.

Seb arched his back and rubbed his shoulder. “I feel bruised. Like I’ve just fallen down some stairs.”

“It must be affecting us all differently.” Ivy was starting to sweat beneath her jacket but decided against taking it off. Johnny Hands had said that the Skaptikon fooled you; perhaps it was tricking their senses, telling them one thing when the reality was quite different.

Valian picked up the Great Uncommon Bag and stuffed it inside his jacket. “There’s no alarm going off; the bag must have worked.”

The three of them examined their surroundings. A ragged hole in one wall appeared to lead out onto a dusty stone staircase covered in thorny weeds. Wind whistled through the opening.

“What do you think this room is?” Seb asked, wincing as he bent to pick up his rucksack. “A cell?”

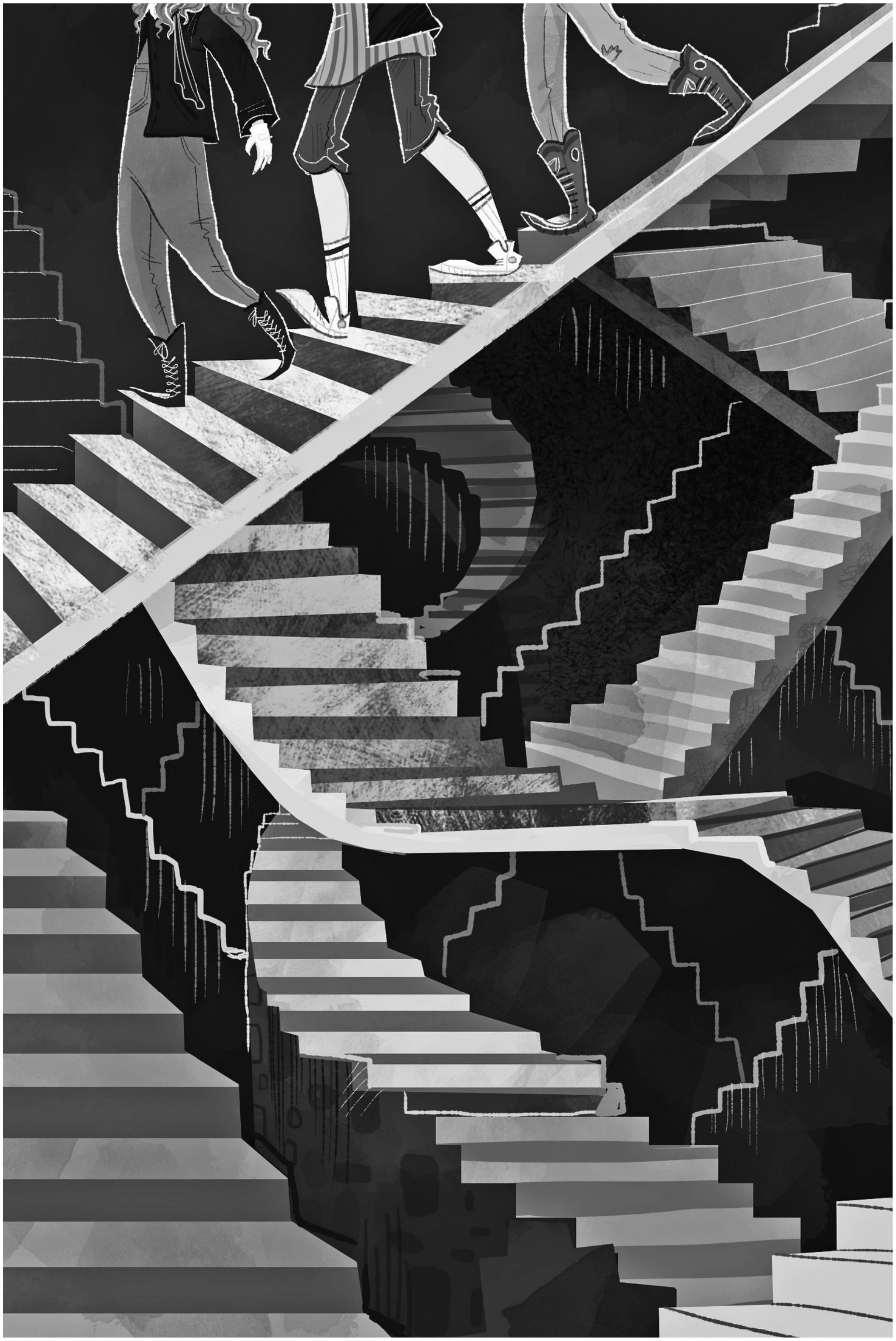
“The Skaptikon famously doesn’t have cells,” Valian said. “It must be an old warden’s room. They stopped using them after a while; not even the wardens lasted long in this place.” He pulled a small garden trowel out of his inside pocket. Ivy recognized it—Johnny Hands had given it to him last winter; it glowed pale blue when it sensed the presence of the dead. “Hopefully we can use Ivy’s whispering to find the jar and get out of here ASAP.”

Ivy’s face flushed. She didn’t like the thought of them relying on an ability she didn’t fully understand; she’d only really been able to harness her talents once. “I’ll try,” she said with a forced smile. “If the broken soul inside the Jar of Shadows is powerful enough, I could use it as a homing beacon and pinpoint where it’s coming from.” The soul inside the Great Uncommon Bag was stronger than most; she didn’t see why it shouldn’t be the same with the Jar of Shadows.

“Let’s stay close,” Valian suggested, zipping up his leather jacket and rubbing his gloves together to keep warm. “It’ll be better if we face this place together.”

Ivy was still sweltering. Seb drummed his fingers against his thighs, trying to relax. “Think of Johnny Hands’s advice,” she told him. “Try and fool the Skaptikon like it fools you. Beat it at its own game.”

Seb looked at her blankly. “Yeah. Because we all totally understand what that means.”



Ivy led the way out into a series of interweaving staircases, doors, platforms and porticos—all constructed of the same gray stone. Light and shadow fell strangely, so it wasn't clear where one structure ended and another began. Wind screeched in her ears; she couldn't tell where it was coming from.

"It's like this artist I studied at school," Seb said. "Escher. He painted all these illusions and impossible constructions—stuff where it looked like a staircase was going down, when it was actually going up."

No wonder it sends you mad, Ivy thought.

She tried to concentrate on her feet, treading carefully over the weed-covered stone. Taking a few steps forward, she reached out with her senses. Echoing voices murmured all around her—the fragmented souls of the dead.

Valian's trowel glowed brighter. "Could be inmates," he said. "Or could be Selena and Jack-in-the-Green. Be on your guard."

Ivy listened carefully to each voice, checking for the jar, but couldn't find it. After a while searching, she sensed a strange whisper carried on the wind. She closed her eyes and concentrated, trying to distinguish it from the others. It didn't seem like the mutterings of one of the dead because it wasn't moving. Instead, it felt trapped. Older. Darker, like someone chanting deep under the earth.

Ivy's eyes snapped open. "I think I've got it," she announced, surprising herself. It *had* to be the Jar of Shadows; it sounded similar to the Great Uncommon Bag. "But sensing it isn't the problem; it's locating it that's going to be difficult. We need to go farther in."

They moved onto a platform with a sheer drop on both sides. Beneath them, a tangle of staircases twisted down into the shadows. Ivy's sense of perspective warped every time she looked up from her shoes—the gray paths and steps seemed to fracture into jagged pieces and overlap. She didn't suffer from vertigo, but the feeling was very similar, like seeing your surroundings through a kaleidoscope.

Seb rubbed the space between his eyebrows. "Is it me or does it feel like we're walking upside down?"

Valian swayed. "Or like the ground is moving."

“Time to call on a friend, I think.” Ivy reached into her satchel and pulled out Scratch, who was trembling.

“Ivy don’t likings in the Skaptikon,” the bell said, whirring nervously. “Gettings of out?”

“No, Scratch,” Ivy said. “We have to stay in here till we find the Jar of Shadows. Can you help us? What does this place feel like to you?”

“Normals not,” he said in an unsteady voice. “Scratch sensings storm can.”

At that moment a deafening clap split the air. Ivy threw her arms out for balance, the sound reverberating through her bones. “Was that *thunder*?!” she exclaimed.

“No way.” Seb tipped his head back. “This is impossible.”

It was raining.

Droplets fell from nowhere, spitting off the gray stone. Ivy felt her cheeks; her skin was bone-dry. *It must be some kind of illusion.* She searched for clouds and instead spotted two figures standing on a platform high above her. One was incredibly tall and green; the other hovered over the floor, robes flapping in the wind. Even through the rain Ivy could see them glaring down at her.

No! Her legs jerked. “Seb! Valian!” she shrieked. “We need to run. *Now!*”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ivy lurched into a sprint, her heart pounding, Scratch clutched tightly in her hand.

"They're coming!" Seb shouted, chasing her down. "Faster!"

She glanced over her shoulder. Jack-in-the-Green was airborne, shooting toward them with his spiky limbs tucked under his torso like a giant green dart. Alongside him, Selena sped through the rain, her dark braid lashing whiplike over her shoulders. She bared her needlelike teeth as she locked eyes with Ivy. "Your bodies will rot in here!" she shrieked. "No one will ever find you!"

Ivy thumped into Valian's side.

"Ivy—look out!"

But she had already overbalanced.

"Whoa!" She felt her feet slip from beneath her….

And then she was falling.

"Seb!" The gray stone blurred past her on either side. Her limbs flailed. "Valian!"

She hit an invisible surface and stalled in midair, as if she was floating. She couldn't see anything supporting her. After a few seconds she began sinking again, but this time there was something cold pressing against her body.

She wriggled frantically. "Scratch!" she screamed, bringing him to her ear. "What's happening?"

“State changings Skaptikon,” he cried. “Ivy needs be swimmings!”

Swimming! Ivy kicked her legs. She stretched her hands above her head and hauled them down to her sides in powerful strokes. Her body surged upward.

At first she couldn’t see the surface of the water—she could only feel the change between air and liquid—but then she angled her head and spotted the ripples made by the rain. The water came up to her shoulders.

She took a deep breath and started treading water to stay afloat. She wasn’t sure how, but as she was falling, the air must have changed from gas to liquid.

The nearest solid surface was a tall stone staircase thirty feet away. At its summit she saw the underside of a circular platform, spilling over with weeds. Ivy paddled desperately toward it. With Scratch still locked in her grasp, it took all her energy.

She yanked herself onto the bottom step and lay back, panting. Her clothes and skin were dry; around her was only air. “Can you see Seb and Valian anywhere?” she asked Scratch. “Do you know where I am?”

“Goings where Scratch try to see,” he said somberly, “but fallings too fast went.”

“It’s all right,” she said, giving him a squeeze. She was grateful just to have him there; she couldn’t imagine a worse place to be alone.

As she recovered her senses, she considered how she might reach Seb and Valian. She had no clue how far away they were, and she had no feathers left with which to contact them. She regarded the endless maze of stairways and viaducts surrounding her and tried to dispel the feeling of panic.

“Ivy?” Scratch trilled in her hand. “Beings don’t sad. All is not losings.”

Ivy sniffed, fighting the urge to cry. She clutched the little bell to her chest, using her whispering to sense the fragment of broken soul inside him. It was so warm and chirpy that it gave her hope.

She thought about her whispering. Perhaps she could use the Jar of Shadows to help navigate; it was a fixed point in the Skaptikon. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and tried to refocus. *Keep it together,* she told herself.

Thunder rumbled overhead as she got to her feet and plodded up the stairs to the circular platform. She concentrated on trying to control her senses—though in the thunderstorm it was difficult. Eventually she fixed on the heartbeat of the Jar of Shadows….

And it was closer than before—*much* closer.

As Ivy reached the top step, she hesitated. The platform was covered with weeds and pockmarked with crevices, as if an ancient battle had once taken place there. In the center, standing by itself in its frame, was a wooden door painted powder blue and decorated with pale dancing figures. It was the only structure not made of stone that Ivy had seen in the Skaptikon.

She lifted Scratch to her chest. "The jar is here," she decided. The heartbeat was stronger than ever before, and a mournful voice began to crystallize in her mind. She caught words, but they weren't English. "It feels like it's right in front of me."

Suddenly the floor tipped and Ivy dropped to her knees, clinging to the weeds for support. Her vision wavered.

Scratch jangled. "All in Ivy's head it's beings!" he told her.

His voice sounded warped. The Skaptikon must be playing tricks on her hearing as well as her balance, Ivy realized. She knew she had to fight against it. She curled her hands into fists and summoned all her strength, focusing hard on the Jar of Shadows. Its voice tapered into one clear pulse. It was coming from behind the door.

She approached it slowly. The broken soul within the jar sounded louder and clearer with every step. *This is it.* Her stomach fluttered as she reached for the brass handle and pressed down.

"Ivy, no!" Scratch screamed.

She drew her hand back, feeling his anguish. "Scratch, what's wrong?"

"Scratch not understandings," he said, his voice brittle. "Ivy not wantings to open jar. What Ivy thinks doing?"

“Open the jar?” Ivy repeated. “I don’t want to—” She froze and stared at the door handle, suddenly remembering one of the punch lines from Stanley’s jokes. *When is a door not a door?…When it’s ajar.*

Her chest tightened as she took a step back, realization sweeping through her. The Skaptikon was tricking her….The door *was* the jar. She’d been about to open Pandora’s box!

She steadied herself. *Fool the Skaptikon like it fools you*—that had been Johnny Hands’s advice. Perhaps she had to make the Skaptikon believe that she could see the truth—a jar, not a door?

Imagining hard, she reached down to the base of the door and spread her arms wide as if she was about to lift the entire doorframe into the air. As her hands touched the wooden surface, it transformed into porcelain, and a large jar—covered in the same white and blue patterns as the door had been—appeared before her. Ivy strained to lift it but managed only to slide it to the very edge of the platform.

Behind her she heard a rustle, and she swiveled on her heels, reaching for her yo-yo.

“Ivy, you found it!” said a familiar voice.

“Seb?” Her eyes glowed with relief as he came into focus. “Thank goodness! Are you OK? What happened?”

“We tried looking for you,” he told her, stepping closer.

Ivy felt so thankful, her legs went weak. “It’s all right. I had Scratch with me.”

“You should get away from the jar,” he urged, staring at it over her shoulder. “It’s dangerous.”

Ivy frowned. She wanted to run over to him, but there was something about his voice that made her hesitate. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it. “Are you…OK?”

Behind Seb, Ivy spied Valian heaving himself up onto the platform. He caught her eye immediately and put a finger to his lips. Ivy wasn’t sure what was going on. His uncommon trowel was glowing brightly, but it didn’t make sense; there were no dead people nearby.

“Just step away from the jar,” Seb repeated.

As Valian stalked up behind him, a cold chill ran down Ivy’s spine. She raised her yo-yo in her right hand, Scratch clutched tightly in her left. “Why do you want me to get away from the jar, Seb?” she asked.

He scowled and came nearer.

It’s not him, she thought with a start. *It’s definitely not him.*

Against all her better judgment, she flicked her wrist in the direction of her brother, sending a torrent of wind spinning toward him. Seb made a horrible hissing sound and dived aside, dodging its path. Then, with a swift shake, he shifted into Jack-in-the-Green.

Valian charged him from behind while Ivy did a loop-the-loop with her yo-yo, blasting off another cyclone.

“STOP!” screeched a voice from above. Selena Grimes hovered down to meet them, the real Seb struggling in her arms. Jack-in-the-Green snatched Valian in a razor-sharp grip.

Valian screamed as if he’d been stabbed.

“You ignorant little children,” Selena spat. “You really thought you could stop me from getting hold of the Jar of Shadows?” She laughed and gripped Seb even tighter, making him yelp in pain.

Ivy gritted her teeth, knowing she had to keep Selena talking to give herself time to think. “What are you going to do with it?” she asked.

“Break it open,” Selena replied, her eyes glinting. “In the Grivens stadium. All around the world millions of uncommoners will be watching the contest. It will be the ultimate demonstration of the Dirge’s power.”

Ivy thought of all the traders who would be at the stadium, her friends among them. “But everyone will be killed!”

Selena grinned. “Of course. The Jar of Shadows contains the greatest fears of everyone on the planet. With its power, we will overwhelm anyone who dares oppose us, and the Dirge will finally rule Lundinor.”

No matter what, Ivy knew she couldn’t let Selena take that jar—there were too many lives at stake. She wouldn’t be able to overcome Selena and Jack-in-the-Green by force; she needed some other leverage….

“This can all be over in matter of seconds,” Selena said with a nasty smile. “Step away from the jar and tell me where you’ve hidden that journal.”

Amos’s journal? Ivy didn’t know why Selena was asking about that now. She looked at the Jar of Shadows, standing close to the edge of the platform. Perhaps that was her leverage….

“You can’t use the jar if I destroy it first!” Ivy shouted, stuffing her yo-yo and Scratch into her pocket and putting both hands on the jar. If she gave it a hard enough shove, she could push it over the side.

Selena’s eyes flashed with panic. “No!”

“She’s bluffing,” said Jack-in-the-Green. “If she destroys the jar, she will kill herself and her two friends.”

Ivy turned and put her back to the jar so that they knew she meant business. “But at least then you won’t be able to use it. The Skaptikon might even contain its power, and no one else would be hurt.” She looked down. If she pushed the jar in the right direction, it would land in that patch of water she’d been floundering in a few minutes earlier and wouldn’t break.

Selena scowled and put her sharp teeth to Seb’s neck, hissing.

Hoping her plan would work, Ivy pushed with all her might. With a loud scraping sound, the jar toppled over and disappeared into the abyss.

“Idiot!” Selena shouted. She threw Seb aside and leaped over the edge of the platform. Jack-in-the-Green unfolded his wings and took to the air, Valian clutched tightly in his second set of arms.

Ivy fumbled for her yo-yo, but Seb was quicker. He rolled to his feet and in one fluid motion, like a trained swordsman, drew his drumsticks. Aiming at Jack-in-the-Green, he struck the first blow decisively, beating both drumsticks double-time. The mantis’s wings twisted and he tumbled off course. Valian wriggled free and dropped down onto the stone with a thud.

“Over here,” Ivy cried, beckoning them to her side. She got to her knees and looked over the precipice. Half-submerged in invisible liquid, Selena Grimes was locked in a strange dance with the Jar of Shadows. “We can still stop her.” She turned, expecting to find Seb at her side, but he was kneeling sixty feet away, Valian slumped limply in his arms.

“IVY!” he yelled.

Ivy got to her feet and rushed over. Valian's jacket was hanging open and there was a large dark patch on his gray T-shirt. *No, Valian. Not that…*

"He needs help," Seb said, tugging the Great Uncommon Bag out from inside Valian's jacket. "There's so much blood. We need to get him to a hospital."

Valian's eyes flickered open. He batted an arm at the bag and, understanding his meaning, Seb held it under his lips. Valian coughed and croaked, "Lundinor Infirmary."

"I'll go through first," Seb suggested. "That way I can pull him through from the other side."

Once her brother had disappeared, Ivy used the last of her strength to push Valian into the bag. Tears ran down her cheeks as she guided his basketball shoes into the darkness.

Malicious laughter erupted over her shoulder and she turned to see Selena Grimes rising through the air, Jack-in-the-Green flying beside her with the Jar of Shadows in his arms.

There was an empty feeling in the pit of Ivy's stomach as she crawled into the bag.

They had failed. The Dirge now possessed one of the Great Uncommon Good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ivy wiggled her toes, feeling crisp sheets. Her head was resting on something soft. She opened her eyes and saw that she was lying on a narrow camp bed in a large canvas tent. The walls were covered with hundreds of pockets, each containing a flask, vial or bottle filled with a different-colored liquid, some bubbling or steaming. The air reeked of antiseptic, and there was a chatter of voices outside.

With difficulty, she turned her head and spotted Seb and Valian asleep on camp beds beside her, their faces shining with sweat. “Seb?” she hissed.

She remembered Valian’s wound but guessed, from the peaceful expression on his face, that he had received treatment. *The Lundinor Infirmary.* That’s where Valian had sent them.

All at once she recalled what had happened to the Jar of Shadows. She had to warn people! She tried to sit up, but immediately her vision swirled. Instead she reached for her satchel, which was sitting at the end of her bed. Scratch trilled as she tugged him out.

“Safe Ivy’s,” he said in a relieved voice. She hugged him tightly, grateful for his help in the Skaptikon. “Nurses tent bringing to you,” he explained. “Knowings of your face, so sendings featherlight to Sylvie Granma.”

“Granma Sylvie—is she here?”

Scratch vibrated. “Visitings once she but sleepings were you.”

Slowly Ivy grasped what he was saying. The infirmary staff had recognized Ivy and Seb—doubtless from pictures in the newspapers last winter—and contacted Granma Sylvie. Ivy wondered if anyone had figured out that they'd come from the Skaptikon. She didn't know how long they'd been there.

She rummaged through her satchel, searching for something she could use to attract attention. Amos's journal and the photo frame would be of no help; she had no feathers left, and her allowance bag was full of tiny low-grade objects she had no idea how to use.

Then she spotted a piece of black card with gold writing on it in one of the inside pockets and pulled it out.

Johnny Hands's business card. Ivy recalled his words: *"I desire to inquire."*

The tent walls suddenly flapped and Johnny Hands appeared out of thin air, sitting on a chair at the foot of Ivy's bed. "Good evening, Ivy Sparrow," he said, crossing one leg over the other and removing his jester's hat.

Ivy wasn't sure how he'd got there so quickly—some trick of the dead, no doubt.

"I'm guessing you want to inquire about my tutoring services."

Ivy frowned. "*What?* No, I need your help…." She wasn't sure what to tell him—that they'd been to the Skaptikon and failed to stop Selena Grimes from finding the Jar of Shadows?

"Ah, my mistake." Johnny Hands traced the brim of his jester's hat with his bony fingers. "I heard you were in the market for a tutor and presumed that, since I'm probably the only other whisperer you know, you'd need my services."

Ivy choked. "*You're* a whisperer?" She hadn't even considered that the dead *could* be, let alone…Johnny Hands.

"But of course," he said, twirling a hand through the air. "If you don't believe me, ask yourself how it is that I know you're looking for a teacher."

The only person other than Seb with whom Ivy had discussed her whispering was Mr. Punch. The quartermaster had suggested finding a tutor, but surely he wouldn't have revealed Ivy's secret to Johnny Hands unless…

She remembered Johnny Hands spying on Jack-in-the-Green outside the shepherd's hut. "Your patron…is it Mr. Punch?"

He flashed his crooked teeth.

There was obviously more to him than Ivy—or Valian—knew. If he had the trust of Mr. Punch, perhaps it was safe to accept his offer of help. "I have so many questions," she admitted. It was amazing to meet someone with the same gift as her. "How do I turn it off? Do you suffer from the headaches too?"

"I'm afraid you can never turn it off," Johnny Hands said, "but you can increase or decrease your field of sense. For example"—he floated off the chair and rose toward the tent roof, turning slowly in midair—"I can control my whispering so that I only sense what's inside this tent. It's always easier to use the natural barriers around you—walls, lines in the pavement, furniture; that kind of thing." He floated back to his seat. "Your turn."

Ivy looked at Seb and Valian, who were still asleep. She had time for one attempt.

All around her she could sense the voices of broken souls in the infirmary. She tried to ignore anything beyond the tent walls, imagining the whole world only existed within that small space. Slowly the muttering began to fade.

"I think it's working!" she exclaimed.

"Good," Johnny Hands said. "Now try to direct your senses toward me. Tell me—how many uncommon objects do I have upon my person right now?"

A few voices began murmuring as Ivy concentrated on Johnny Hands. They sounded shrill and metallic; the trapped souls of uncommon objects.

She counted. "Three?"

Johnny Hands clapped. "Well done!"

There was a rustle outside the tent. Ivy tensed as she saw the silhouettes of two people talking in hushed voices.

One was tall and slim. "I understand what you're saying, but I can't take you with me." *Granma Sylvie*—Ivy would recognize her voice anywhere. “The deeper we go into that place, the more I worry about what we might find—what I might have hidden from you.”

“Hidden from me? Pish,” the other figure remarked with a familiar Cockney drawl. *Ethel.* “Believe me, I knew you, Sylv. There’s no way you were involved with the Dirge, no matter what this memory of yours means.”

Granma Sylvie sighed. “I keep thinking of Selena Grimes’s deception. What if I was lying to you all those years, like she was?”

“Ridiculous,” Ethel snorted. “You’ve got to trust in who you are. You’re scared, is all.”

There was a long *vrrrp* as someone unzipped the tent opening. Ivy’s eyes shot to the chair. Johnny Hands had vanished…and there was so much more she wanted to ask. “Ivy?” Granma Sylvie smiled. “You’re awake!” She came hurrying over and hugged Ivy tightly, then ran a hand across her forehead. “How are you feeling?”

Ivy shrugged, sending pain shooting between her shoulder blades. Her body ached, but she had no idea how bad anything was. She hadn’t felt this awful inside the Skaptikon—but that place had completely messed with her senses.

“Here—this should help.” Ethel handed Ivy a pewter flask filled with warm liquid.

Ivy held it under her nose. It smelled like ladies’ perfume.

“It’s called Raider’s Tonic,” Ethel said. “Mr. Littlefair mixed it. Takes its name from the scouts ’oo drank it after storming ancient sites looking for uncommon objects ’undreds of years ago.” The corners of her eyes crinkled. “It’ll have you feeling better in no time.” She covered her mouth with her hand. “Much better than the stuff they give you in ’ere.”

Ivy took a sip. The tonic was honey-sweet with a spicy kick. As it warmed her insides, she felt her senses sharpening.

“Granma?” rasped a voice. Seb sat up, blinking. “That you?” He gave Ivy a quizzical expression, then turned to Valian. “Valian!” He shook him gently by the shoulder.

“Careful,” Granma Sylvie warned.

Ethel handed Seb a flask of Raider's Tonic as Valian eased himself up, rubbing his head.

"Argh—I feel like I've been punched in the gut," he groaned.

"What happened to you three?" Granma Sylvie asked. "The infirmary staff couldn't tell me where you'd been or how you got here. They said they just found you in a tent, passed out."

Thank goodness, Ivy thought. The Raider's Tonic gave her an idea. "Hundred Punch," she said. "We accidentally drank a bit too much of it, and then we rode an uncommon rug and started feeling sick, and then…I think Valian fell off into some bushes."

Ethel raised her thin eyebrows. "Must've been very thorny bushes."

Valian winced. "They were."

Granma Sylvie put her arm around Ivy and kissed her forehead. "I'm just glad that's all it was." She looked at Ethel. "Let's take them back to the inn—get them into a proper bed."

Ethel nodded. "Right you are."

—

Ivy figured the Raider's Tonic had done its job because, by the time they reached the street outside the Cabbage Moon, her head was clear, the ground had stopped moving and she felt in control of her senses again. The evening light was dim and the Gauntlet had quieted. There were a few last-minute shoppers picking up bargains, but most of the stalls were vacant.

"Ivy!" Alexander Brewster raised his hand in greeting. Ivy glanced at Seb and Valian, who were wearily trudging through the front door of the Cabbage Moon. She desperately needed to talk to them about what had happened in the Skaptikon, but she didn't have the heart to ignore Alexander. "I'll be two minutes," she told Granma Sylvie. "I'm just going to say hi."

"*One* minute," Granma Sylvie said. "I want you in bed ASAP."

"Hey," Ivy called to Alexander, hurrying over. "How're you doing?" The walls of the alehouse shook with noise.

Alexander shrugged. "All right. Have you had a good day?"

Ivy wasn’t sure what to say. “Er…I was at the infirmary. I haven’t been feeling well.” She rubbed her belly.

Alexander winced. “Won’t offer you any Dragon’s Breath, then—not a good idea if you’ve got an upset stomach.” He cocked his head toward the alehouse. “Great for singing, though.”

Ivy smiled, hearing the laughter and out-of-tune voices coming from the revelers within. She caught the distinctive bass of Drummond Brewster, and the patrons quieted as he started singing on his own. Ivy couldn’t catch all the words, but the tune and the rhythm were familiar.

*The ’vatum men nursery rhyme…*Ivy was sure of it. “That song your father’s singing…”

Before she could finish there was a loud *smash,* the singing ended and the back door of the alehouse burst open. Out stormed Drummond.

“Boy, get back in here!” he raged, arms in the air. “I can’t do everything!”

Ivy edged away as he came toward them.

“Who’s this?” he demanded, pointing at Ivy.

“She…” Alexander didn’t finish.

Drummond studied Ivy more closely. “I’ve seen you at the Cabbage Moon. Asking questions, are you?” He poked a huge sausagelike finger into Ivy’s chest, knocking her satchel off her arm. “Well, you can keep them to yourself!”

He stared down his nose at his son. “Inside. Now.” As he returned to the alehouse, Alexander rushed to help Ivy gather up her belongings, which had spilled out onto the road.

“I’m…sorry,” he managed.

Ivy reached for Amos’s journal, but Alexander grabbed it first.

His eyebrows twitched as he saw the smoking hourglass on the front. “Sorry—you’d better put this away.”

As he handed the journal back to Ivy, a huge whooshing sound filled the air like wind filling a sail. Someone screamed in alarm behind them.

“Fire! FIRE! BLACKFIRE!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A smoking hourglass was lit up in fire across the front of the alehouse. The building was engulfed in seconds. People started running away, shouting.

“Ivy, help me with these!”

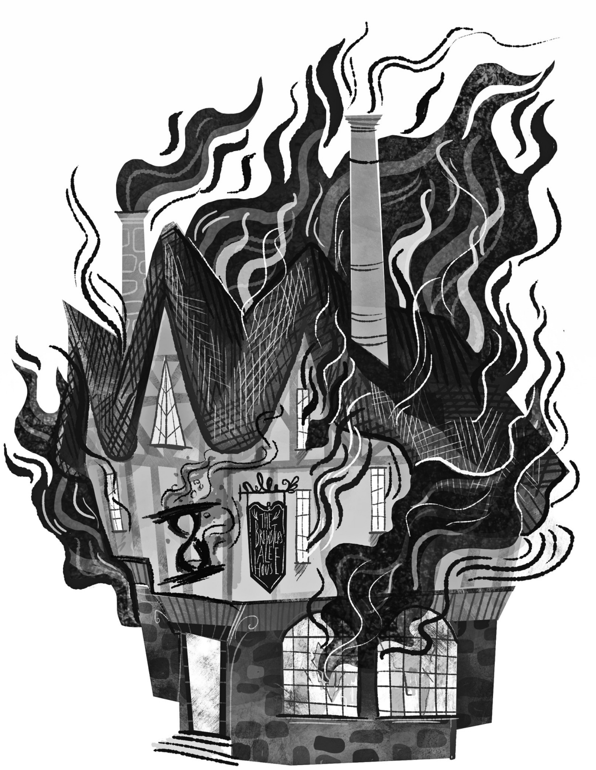
She turned to find Mr. Littlefair staggering out of the Cabbage Moon carrying four buckets of water. Ivy hurried over and grabbed two. Alexander followed, with more buckets.

“Hurry!” Mr. Littlefair shouted. “We need to douse the flames!”

“What kind of fire is that?” Ivy asked. The flames weren’t orange; they were plum and crimson colored, with licks of black. They seemed to be consuming the place more quickly than regular fire could.

“Blackfire,” Mr. Littlefair said. “Deadly. It can only be made using mixology.”

Ivy placed one bucket at her feet and swung the other toward the fire. Customers were still running out of the building as the water hit.



“It’s no use,” Alexander shouted. “Look!” He pointed to the roof, where the fire was rapidly eating through the thatch.

Ivy grabbed the second bucket and swung it toward the alehouse just as a red-faced Drummond Brewster came barreling through the front door. He was clutching to his chest the charred framed photo of him inventing Dragon’s Breath Ale.

“SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING!” he boomed, charging out among the fleeing crowd. He grabbed a man by his lapels and began shaking him. “My alehouse is burning down! The Dragon’s Breath is fueling the flames; it’ll be ashes in a matter of minutes!”

Alexander hurried to his side, tugging on his apron. “I’m here, Pa. I’m OK.”

“Do something useful!” his father snapped, eyes still fixed on the alehouse. Ivy couldn’t help but notice the look of disappointment on Alexander’s face.

Suddenly she heard a siren. *The underguard. About time.*

Two black 4x4s came rumbling into the street and the remaining traders formed large circles around them. The passenger door of one opened and Inspector Smokehart stormed out and began shouting.

"Castleguards—get control of this blaze!" he commanded, pointing to the team who had just emerged from the other vehicle. Ivy noticed they had slightly different uniforms to normal underguards—a castle design was embroidered on the backs of their cloaks. "You three," he called to the trio of constables from his own car. "Cordon off the area, get everyone inside. We need to have this blaze under control before any pyroaches arrive."

"Pyroaches?" Ivy said.

"A race of the dead," Mr. Littlefair mumbled, fetching more water from the tap outside the Cabbage Moon. "They can only exist in extremely high temperatures, so they live in volcanoes, incinerators, power plants—those kinds of places. You only find them in undermarts when something's burning."

"Are they dangerous?" she asked, filling one of her buckets.

"They eat living flesh." Mr. Littlefair strained under the weight of two sloshing pails. "You don't want to meet one."

Johnny Hands had once told Ivy that smoke in an undermart was a bad omen. It made sense now.

The castleguards opened the trunk of their vehicle and each picked up something brightly colored, and carried it toward the alehouse.

"Are those *buckets and spades*?" Ivy exclaimed. The plastic shovels were luminous shades of pink, blue and yellow and the buckets were just like those used by children to build sandcastles at the seaside. When the castleguards were in position, some aimed their spades at the alehouse, holding them to their shoulders like rifles, while others turned their buckets upside down on the dusty road: an unending stream of sand and water spouted from the spades toward the flames.

A hand gripped Ivy's shoulder.

"What's going on?" Seb asked. The others came rushing through the doors of the Cabbage Moon behind him.

Granma Sylvie put a hand to her chest. “Ivy—you’re OK.” She clasped her in a hug.

“I’m fine,” Ivy said, pulling back. “I was just talking to Alexander when the alehouse burst into flames. The smoking hourglass materialized out of thin air like it had been lit on a timer.”

The underguards started shuffling back, and Inspector Smokehart appeared in the space. “We will be taking witness statements from anyone who may have seen something,” he announced. “Whether you think you did or not, it could all be important. A murderer is on the loose, and I suspect we will be adding arson to the list of charges against them.”

He caught sight of Ivy and Seb and curled his lip. “You two. Again. I saw you at the memorial; you’re making quite a habit of appearing at crime scenes. Do you expect me to believe that it is just a coincidence?”

Seb shifted his weight, eyes down. Ivy didn’t bother offering a defense; Smokehart wasn’t going to believe her.

Remembering something, she felt for her satchel and clicked the clasp shut….Amos’s journal was inside.

One of the castleguards approached the inspector, clearing his throat. “We think it’s some kind of time-delay blackfire concoction, sir. Never seen the formula before; must be the work of a highly skilled mixologist. It’ll take a good ten minutes to get those flames under control with our buckets and spades.”

The alehouse thatch was still smoking and the walls were charred, but the majority of the strange purple flames had disappeared.

Drummond and Alexander appeared in front of Brewster’s. “Well?” Drummond cried, charging up to Smokehart. “Have you found out who did this?”

The inspector stiffened. “We are just beginning our investigation, sir,” he said tightly. “You need to step aside and let us continue.”

“Step aside?!” Drummond thrust his charred photo in front of Smokehart. “Have you seen what has happened here? My reputation, my livelihood! I will not step aside! What are you doing just standing there?”

Ivy noticed that Smokehart’s neck was now speckled with blood-red dots, which only happened when he was seriously angry. She shuffled back.

The sound alerted Smokehart. “You!” His head shot around. “Don’t think you’re getting away. I want you searched.” He pointed to one of his constables, who promptly strode up to Ivy and patted her down before lifting her satchel over her head.

“Wait!” she said, pulling it back. “That’s mine! You have no right to do this!”

Seb tugged on the strap. “Oi! Give it back!”

“Excuse me,” Granma Sylvie said in a firm voice, stepping forward.

The constable scowled and swept aside his black cloak, giving a glimpse of his uncommon toilet brush. Ivy hadn’t forgotten the horrific pain she’d felt when she was attacked with one before. She hesitated before laying a hand on Seb’s elbow.

“Let him have it,” she said softly. “It’s not worth it.”

Smokehart snatched Ivy’s satchel, ripped it open and yanked the uncommon photo frame out first.

“Hold this, boy,” he barked, shoving the satchel into the arms of the closest bystander, Alexander Brewster. Ivy tried to attract the boy’s attention, but he was looking at his father. She tensed as Smokehart inspected the photo frame.

“Really, Inspector! Is this all you can think of?” Drummond protested. “Examining the contents of a little girl’s bag? You should be hunting for the real culprit. This is the work of a master criminal, not a child.”

The insult bounced off Ivy; she was much more concerned about Smokehart finding Amos’s journal. He took the satchel back from Alexander and rooted through it, dropping Ivy’s belongings one by one. She flinched when Scratch hit the dusty ground; she could see him trembling. Finally, Smokehart turned the bag upside down and shook it. Ivy studied the pile at his feet. The journal wasn’t there.

Had she lost it? If Smokehart had found it, the smoking hourglass would be all the evidence he needed to connect her with the memorial murders. More worryingly, in the wrong hands the journal could be dangerous. Amos might have recorded any number of powerful secrets inside.

Ivy tried to think back. The last time she'd seen it was when Alexander had handed it back after it had fallen out of her satchel, but in all the commotion she could have dropped it again. She scrutinized the closest bystanders; perhaps one of them had picked it up.

Seb nudged her in the ribs and nodded at Alexander. Ivy spotted the corner of Amos's journal protruding from the pocket of his dirty apron. She relaxed and tried in vain to catch his eye. She couldn't understand why he'd helped her, but she was thankful that he had.

Smokehart clenched his teeth, his dark glasses fixed on Ivy.

Drummond Brewster gave an exasperated sigh. "Well, I could have told you you'd find no evidence in there. Whoever's behind this has obviously been plotting my downfall for some time." He waved the framed clipping in Smokehart's face. "They're jealous of my success! See!"

The inspector looked at the uncommon photo frame in his hands. "I have a suggestion," he said, snatching the burned newspaper cutting out of Drummond's grasp. "Why don't we put your special picture in this, if your frame is too damaged?"

Ivy could only watch in stunned silence as he inserted the clipping into the uncommon frame.

Instantly the dusty street was covered with an image of a stainless-steel kitchen. The crowd hushed, and Smokehart's eyebrows disappeared below the top of his dark glasses.

The ghostly image of a fresher, thinner Drummond Brewster popped up from behind a countertop. He was carrying three bottles of different-colored liquid.

"What else do you need, son?" he called. "How about some of this silver stuff?"

Alexander walked into the room, carefully balancing a cauldron in his arms. He put it down on the stove. "No thanks, Pa," he said. "That will dull the effect of the fire. You need just the right balance of ingredients for it to work. I've been experimenting with this formula. We need it to be fiery but not to burn the drinker’s throat.” He added two drops of a fizzy black liquid. The cauldron started to emit steam. “Almost there.”

Drummond peered in and rubbed his hands together. “If this works, I’ll be famous. We could take the alehouse around the world. Quick—let’s get a picture of the moment I invent it.”

Alexander kept his eyes on the contents of the cauldron, but Ivy noticed a line appear on his brow. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Drummond hadn’t invented the ale at all. Alexander had!

Drummond left the scene and came back carrying an uncommon snow globe while Alexander stirred the mixture with a spatula. Ivy gathered it was uncommon because the cauldron started floating.

“OK, it’s done,” Alexander said with a sigh.

Drummond grinned. “Move out of the way, then—let’s get this picture.”

Alexander stepped back, head down, and aimed the snow globe at his dad.

At that moment the scene evaporated and there was only the road before them. “That is PRIVATE!” Drummond raged, snatching the frame from Smokehart and pulling out the newspaper clipping. “How *dare* you!”

There was a smirk on Smokehart’s face. “My apologies,” he said. “Though I must say, that was illuminating.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Granma Sylvie stood in the doorway, the amber light from the landing spilling over her shoulders. She tapped her slipper against the floor. “I understand that you want to stay up, but you’re both getting an early night. No arguments.” A loud scratch reverberated around the room. Granma Sylvie’s gaze flicked to the chimney breast. The uncommon wallpaper was busy rearranging itself into an elaborate re-creation of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*. “The rest will do you good,” she continued in a taut voice. “You’ve had a long couple of days. I’ll see you in the morning. Good night.” She blew them each a kiss before shutting the door.

Ivy heard Seb shuffling in the bunk above. “Hang on. Give it a few seconds.”

She waited for Granma Sylvie’s footsteps to fade away before pulling back her covers and tiptoeing across to the window. She drew back the curtain and looked out. It was dark outside; Brewster’s Alehouse had stopped smoking. A quiet stream of people flowed down the Gauntlet.

There was a dull thud and the Great Uncommon Bag appeared in the middle of the bedroom floor. It rustled as a shape appeared within it.

“All clear?” Valian asked, poking his head out.

Ivy raised a finger to her lips. “Keep your voice down.” His straggly dark locks hung in front of his face as he padded out softly on hands and knees. Behind him, a head of shiny dark hair popped out, followed by a pair of almond-shaped eyes.

“That bag is unbelievable!” Judy whispered, smiling broadly. Her tutu sprang out as she got to her feet. She was wearing bright purple leggings and a gray T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The wheels of her roller skates thrummed as she glided into the center of the room and plonked herself down on the rug. “Thanks for the invite. I love a good emergency meeting.”

Seb leaped quietly down from his bunk. “Glad you came,” he said, flashing her a smile. He sat cross-legged on the floorboards next to her.

“First things first,” Ivy began, shuffling up between Valian and Judy. “How are you feeling? That injury in the Skaptikon looked really serious.”

Valian tapped his jacket. Ivy heard the clink of metal. “The Raider’s Tonic has been helping,” he said. Ivy realized he had a flask tucked inside. “When I got back to my room, Miss H and Miss W had left me several bottles of the stuff. They must have heard about me being admitted to the infirmary.”

Ivy could have sworn she’d seen Ethel sending them a featherlight earlier, but she decided not to bother mentioning it.

“What about you two?” he asked.

Seb rubbed the back of his neck. “Feels like I just played a really hard game of football…and I was the only player on the team.”

It was Ivy’s head that hurt more than anything. Sensing the broken soul inside the Jar of Shadows had been like standing next to the speakers at a gig by Seb’s band. Her head was still buzzing. “Something like that.”

“What about that Alexander Brewster kid?” Seb remarked. “Can you believe it? It was him all along—he’s the real genius behind Dragon’s Breath Ale.”

Ivy looked at her satchel, which was lying on the floor by her bunk. “And he helped me. After the underguards had gone he gave me back Amos’s journal. He didn’t ask any questions either.”

“Maybe he didn’t care,” Seb said. “His dad’s just been exposed as a massive liar. That’s probably his biggest concern right now.”

“I suppose so.” Ivy was shocked to find that Alexander’s own father had exploited him so callously.

Judy’s hazel eyes sparkled. “I’m still getting over the fact that you three have been into the Skaptikon and survived!”

“We failed, though,” Ivy said glumly. “Selena and Jack-in-the-Green got away with the Jar of Shadows, and they’re planning to open it at the Grivens contest tomorrow night. How are we going to stop them now?”

“If we even survive till then.” Seb propped an elbow on his knee, and rested his chin on it. “Selena’s gonna try to get rid of us before then, I just know it.”

“There’s still hope,” Judy told them. “There’s always hope.” She pushed a small brown paper bag into the middle of the floor. “I made these. Try one—they’re meant to be good for thinking.”

Ivy peered closer. The bag was stuffed with dusty white cubes. “Are they…marshmallows?”

“Made with mixology,” Judy explained, grabbing one and holding it in front of her nose. “Mr. Littlefair gave me the recipe when I was practicing for my exams.”

Ivy reached into the packet and took one. It felt just like a regular marshmallow. She gave it a sniff. *Vanilla.* “What do they do?”

“I don’t know,” Judy said. “I was too busy studying to make them before, but like I said—they’re meant to help you think; to give you ideas. That’s why I’ve made them now.”

Valian and Seb grabbed one each. “It can’t make our situation any worse,” Seb decided. “After three? One, two…”

On *three,* Ivy took a bite of her marshmallow. At first it was just gooey and sweet, but then it started fizzing. With a *whoosh,* her bottom lifted off the floor as a dense pillow of steam appeared beneath her.

“What *is* this stuff?” Seb was wobbling around on the small white cloud that had formed under him.

Judy dipped a gloved forefinger into it and rubbed it against her thumb. “Not sure. Perhaps it’s meant to be a cloud of thought….” She took another bite of marshmallow. Ivy, Seb and Valian copied her.

A ball of cloud now appeared under Ivy’s satchel, tipping it up and spilling out the contents for the third time that day. Amos’s journal and the postcard were lifted up and carried into the center of the room.

Ivy watched them as she bobbed up and down. The movement was soothing, helping to focus her mind. Floating toward her on a soft white wave, the journal seemed to be calling out to her. “When we were in the Skaptikon, even though she’d already found the Jar of Shadows, Selena still wanted to know where the journal was,” Ivy remarked. “It must have another value that we don’t know about.”

Valian’s face brightened. “First Selena tries to destroy the postcard, and now she desperately wants the journal. The only connection is Amos Stirling. He’s the key to the whole mystery.”

The postcard bobbed over to Judy and she picked it up. “Oh, now that’s interesting,” she commented, reading the message again. “Before my mum began her training in the Featherlight Guild, she worked at the Lundinor Registry, where the births and deaths of every uncommoner are recorded. You didn’t mention the posting date before—the twenty-seventh of December 1967. That’s two days before Selena Grimes died.”

Ivy’s skin prickled; she thought they might be close to a breakthrough. The rocking motion of the cloud allowed her imagination to drift.

“This would be a whole lot easier if Amos Stirling wasn’t Departed,” Seb said, swaying gently. “He’d have all the answers. There’s nothing uncommon that lets you go back in time, is there? Then we could go and ask him what’s going on.”

Valian snorted. “I wish.”

Ivy’s thoughts were being guided by a gentle tide, pushing her in one direction. They gradually gathered themselves around a single extraordinary concept.

She pondered the riddle they’d had to answer to get into the well at the World’s End.

I have no wings and yet I fly.
If you master me, you will never die.

“You don’t think we could use the Great Uncommon Bag, do you?” she said.

The other three turned to her.

“To do what?” Judy asked.

“To discover why Selena doesn’t want anyone to know about Amos,” Ivy said. “To travel back in time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The next morning, the inn was quiet.

“She’s gone,” Ivy said, trudging back into the bedroom. She closed the door behind her, sighing with regret. She’d wanted to see Granma Sylvie before they left. “There was a note on her pillow explaining that the underguard had called her in early again and she didn’t want to wake us. They’re exploring the bedrooms of the mansion today.”

Ivy could tell from Seb’s expression that he was just as disappointed. As things in Lundinor grew more dangerous, spending a few moments with Granma Sylvie seemed even more important. Ivy knew that they might not see her again.

“I’ve still got the saltshaker. We can check on her when we get back from…” Seb’s face hardened as he looked down at the Great Uncommon Bag.

“I suppose so,” Ivy agreed. She thought about her mum and dad too; they were so far away. “According to the note, Ethel’s coming to collect us after breakfast.”

Valian was sitting on the bottom bunk. “We’d better be quick, then. It’ll be easy to avoid Ethel afterward. There’s always a big sale along the Gauntlet today; the House of Bells will be packed.”

“Hmm.” Judy held a faded denim shirt against Seb’s chest. “You can’t wear the L.A. Lakers shirt; it’s too modern. What about this one? It’s from the 1950s.”

Smiling, Seb shrugged off his mandarin coat. “Good idea—thanks.” Judy’s cheeks flushed.

Ivy smoothed down the long sleeves of the black kurta tunic Judy had given her, along with some khaki combat trousers and canvas pumps. *Hobsmatch outfit number two.* She liked this one because the tunic was loose-fitting and easy to move around in.

“This won’t be like looking at the photo in the uncommon frame, will it?” Seb said darkly, arranging the Great Uncommon Bag.

“If it even works,” Ivy pointed out. They still couldn’t be certain of the bag’s capabilities.

Valian stood up and wiped his hands on the back of his vintage Levi’s. “But if it does, just imagine what we could do. I could go back to the day Rosie disappeared and find out what happened. I could even go back and stop my parents—”

“This is *dangerous,*” Ivy cut in, glaring at Valian and her brother. “You’re right: this won’t be like looking at shadows of the past. This will actually *be* the past. We can’t afford to let anyone see us in case it *changes the course of history.* Anything we do could affect what happens now.” The back of her neck tingled. They were messing with things more powerful than any they’d encountered before.

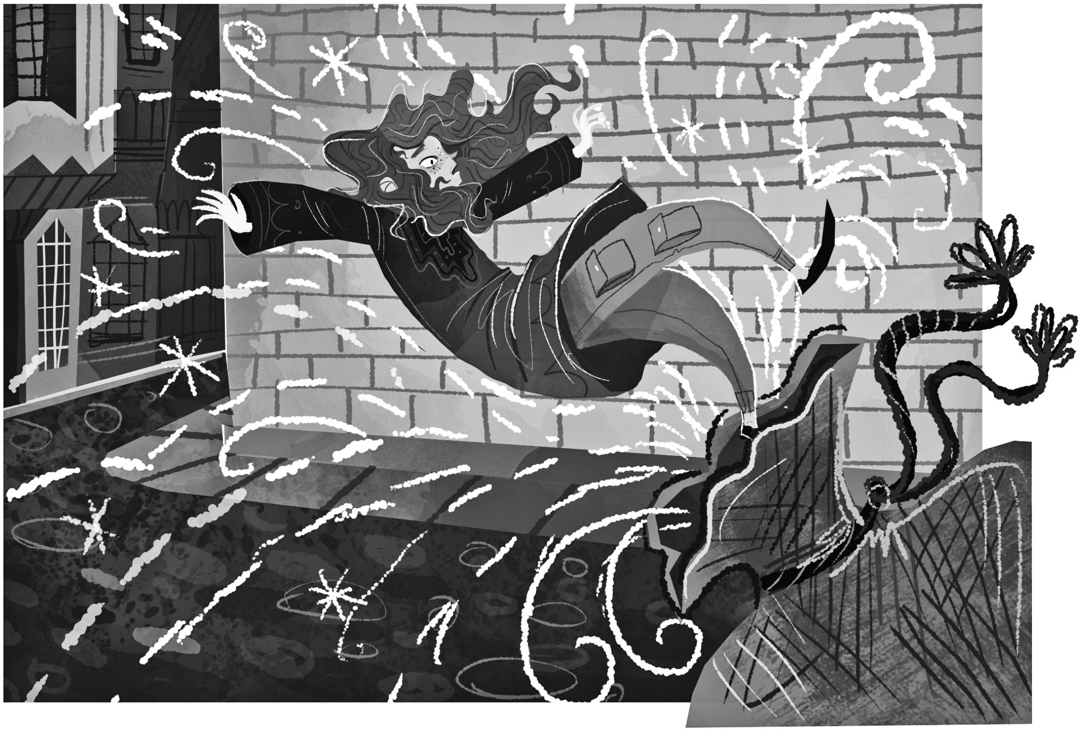
“All right,” Valian muttered. “If we risk disrupting the past, we’ll leave straightaway and come back to the present. Hopefully we can find Amos before that happens.” He took a luggage tag and pen out of his jacket pocket. “I’m using a label to be accurate.”

“Are you sure I can’t come with you?” Judy asked. “I want to stop them as much as you three do.”

“We need you to stay here in case something goes wrong,” Valian said, gulping. “You’re the only other person who’ll know what’s happened to us.” He scribbled on the luggage tag and tied the label to the side of the old burlap sack. “If this works, we’ll arrive in Lundinor two days after Amos sent the postcard—the twenty-ninth of December 1967, the night Selena died.”

Ivy fiddled with her gloves as Valian and Seb crawled into the bag before her. If the experiment went wrong, she didn’t know what might happen to them….She gave Judy a thin smile before putting her head inside.

The bag dragged her forward at high speed and whipped her around in a dizzying pattern of twists and turns—like the teacups at a fairground, except in pitch darkness. Pressure squeezed her face and chest, making her feel queasy. She caught the faint whiff of burning in the air. Just when she thought something might have gone seriously wrong, there was a flash of light and the bag spat her out at the side of a dark cobbled street.



Ivy scrambled to her feet, snatching the Great Uncommon Bag off the ground. From the silver bells glinting on the buildings she could tell that she was in Lundinor, but the undermart had a wintry feel: cast-iron streetlamps stood guard on the pavements, and the air was full of the scents of cinnamon and roast chestnuts.

She gawped at the frost-topped roofs. The bag might just have worked….

“Over here!” Valian waved to Ivy from behind a stack of empty wooden crates beside the road. Stuffing the Great Uncommon Bag into her satchel, she dashed over and tucked herself down beside him.

Crouching on Valian's other side, Seb looked like he was trying not to throw up. Ivy remembered the teacups sensation and guessed that his journey had been particularly awful. "Do you think this is it?" she asked Valian, adrenaline surging through her. "Are we in 1967?"

Valian seemed lost for words. He shook his head and pointed to the crates, which were each stamped with the logo of the business opposite: MR. SNIPPETS. Hanging in the pristine shop window were photographs of men sporting elaborate mustaches; one gentleman had two hairy galleons sailing on his upper lip; others had the roaring head of a dragon or the body of a vintage racing car. Ivy couldn't decide if they'd been fashioned with an uncommon object, or if the resident barber was just incredibly talented. She searched for her reflection in the glass, but it wasn't visible; no one would be able to see them from the street.

"My dad used to get his hair cut here when I was little," Valian managed, his voice disbelieving. "But it didn't look as new as this. We *must* have gone back in time."

"So it worked!" Ivy couldn't believe it. *Time travel*.

"You know what this means," Valian said. "I can return to my childhood and save them—Rosie and my parents…"

Ivy didn't think it was wise to get his hopes up; there was so much they still had to learn. She squeezed his shoulder. "We've only been here a minute—we don't know what's going to happen. Let's get this over with first."

She locked eyes with him, and his expression hardened. "Yeah, OK. You're right."

The clip of heels suddenly disturbed the quiet street.

Ivy tensed. "Someone's coming."

Seb—who had finally regained his composure—craned his neck around the corner of the crates to get a better view. Ivy lowered her head, peeking through a gap.

Someone wearing a long gray cloak and red stilettos swept along the road. As the figure turned, Ivy, Seb and Valian glimpsed a pale face and a long dark braid.

Selena Grimes. She looked *exactly* the same as she did in Ivy's time, almost fifty years later—except that in sixties Lundinor her feet touched the ground. Ivy was looking at a *living* Selena Grimes. "What's she doing here?"

"I don't know, but I can't see Amos yet," Valian whispered. "Let's follow her—she might lead us to him."

Seb got to his feet. "She's heading down the street opposite."

They pursued Selena from a distance, mixing with the traders on the main roads and hiding in the shadows, where it was quieter. Selena's heels were so noisy, they were always able to locate her, even if she occasionally drifted out of sight. The other uncommoners didn't give them a second glance. Ivy hoped none of them had a good memory for faces. Her mind kept returning to the consequences of their time travel, but she tried not to dwell on it.

"Look at what they're using to fly," Seb said. "Vintage." He signaled toward a stream of traders sweeping over the rooftops on vacuum cleaners with flowery fabric bags hanging from the back.

As they continued, Ivy noticed further evidence of the fact that they were walking through a Lundinor of another era—shop signs painted in old-fashioned lettering, and goods displayed in wicker baskets behind dusty wood-framed windows. Traders called, "Cheerio!" as they left buildings; fashion pieces from later decades were missing from their Hobsmatch.

All at once Valian pointed to a recess in the wall. "Quick—in there. I think she's going inside."

They watched from the shadows as Selena stopped outside a door. Instead of producing a key to open it, she stamped one of her stilettos twice on the ground, and they saw a circular metal panel set into the cobbles beneath her feet.

"Drain cover?" Seb mouthed.

With a swish, the disk slid open and Selena Grimes descended into the ground as if there was a platform under her feet, lowering her down. Ivy tensed. The only thing she knew about the drains of Lundinor was that they were inhabited by foul races of the dead.

“We’d better find out what’s down there,” Valian decided.

They waited thirty seconds before sneaking after Selena. The drain cover was only big enough for one person to stand on at a time. Ivy went first. She held her yo-yo in front of her, ready for anything that might jump out when she reached the bottom.

An empty stainless-steel tunnel welcomed her. She pressed herself against the cold wall as she waited for Seb and Valian to descend behind her. The air smelled musty and the floor was wet.

“Ivy—anything down here?” Seb asked, appearing in a crouch on the drain cover. He aimed the light from his cell phone ahead of them.

The end of the passageway was shrouded in shadow; there was no sign of movement. “Nothing yet.” Ivy touched her satchel, thinking of the Great Uncommon Bag inside. If anything happened, they would need to escape fast.

Valian joined them as they crept nervously along the tunnel. The farther they went, the closer the walls seemed to draw in. Eventually the ceiling was so low, Seb had to bend his knees. “OK, this place is definitely getting smaller. What’s going on?” He directed his phone into the distance. The tunnel appeared to shrink to a point at the very end.

“I don’t get it,” Ivy said. “There’s no way out. Where did Selena go?”

Valian narrowed his eyes. “There must be a clue somewhere.”

They continued as far as they could, crawling on their hands and knees when there wasn’t enough room to stand. At the very end of the tunnel Seb swept the light across the wall. Writing had been scratched into the surface, but there was so much, and in so many different hands, that it looked like one huge scribble.

“The crooked sixpence,” Ivy said shakily. “Look.” The coin appeared six times in a circle, the face of each featuring the masked head of a different member of the Dirge, with their code name written below.

“Over here—there’s something written on the other wall.” Seb lifted his phone to illuminate words etched into the steel.

Sing a song of sixpence
A pocket full of spies,

Tell us what you’re seeking
And someone shall reply.

“It’s like the creepiest answering machine message ever.”

Valian scrutinized the tunnel. “This *has* to be where the Dirge’s followers came to contact them. They had a whole army working for them in the sixties—*a pocket full of spies,* like the message says. They must have built secret gateways like this all over Lundinor in order to communicate.”

“So that’s what Selena was doing down here—trying to contact the Dirge.” Ivy picked up a jagged piece of flint and held it to the wall. “You must have to scratch your response; that’s what all this writing is. If only Selena’s wasn’t lost with the others.”

Valian patted his jacket pocket. “I might have something that can help with that.” He retrieved a small plastic flashlight and aimed it at the wall. “People claim you can find a needle in a haystack with an uncommon flashlight. I’ve only ever found stuff that I’d misplaced in my room.”

Seb folded his arms, impressed. “I swear you’ve got more gadgets in that pocket than Q from the James Bond films.”

“Who’s James Bond?” Valian asked, flicking the flashlight switch back and forth.

Seb stared at him. “You’re kidding, right? First Scratch doesn’t know about *Star Wars,* and now this?”

“Valian, is it working?” Ivy asked. No light was coming from it.

“Shhh.” Valian flicked the switch one last time. “It works with sound, not light. I’ve told it to find Selena’s handwriting.”

Ivy listened carefully. The flashlight was clicking. As Valian waved it over the walls, the clicking sped up or slowed down depending on where he positioned it. In no time at all he’d pinpointed Selena’s response.

“I still can’t see it,” Ivy said, shuffling closer. “There’s too much other writing here.”

Valian flicked the flashlight switch again, and the pattern of clicks changed. “It’s in Morse code now; it should spell out the message for us.

Seb—write this down.”

Seb made notes on his phone as Valian deciphered a string of letters from the pattern of dots and dashes.

“I ask the masters of death to change my future,” Seb read when the flashlight had finished. “The ‘masters of death’ must mean the Dirge—it’s as if Selena wanted their help.”

The sound of a knife being sharpened filled the tunnel, and the floor trembled. Ivy steadied herself. “What’s happening?”

The walls drew back and the tunnel got bigger. There was a loud *clang* and the end of the passageway expanded like the pupil of an eye into a dark cave with a low ceiling. The three of them got to their feet and edged in slowly.

The air was cold and damp. Pillars of sandy rock stood sandwiched between floor and ceiling, casting strange shadows. Somewhere in the distance, water was dripping. Ivy flinched as the tunnel entrance closed behind them with a loud scrape. “Where are we?”

Valian stuffed his flashlight back into his pocket and retrieved his uncommon trowel. It was glowing. “Dead here. Hide.”

They managed to dive behind the nearest pillar just in time.

A man in a long-tailed velvet coat stepped *through* the cave wall close by. He had a handsome face with deep-set dark eyes and thick black hair. His high leather boots didn’t touch the ground.

Ivy squinted. There was something familiar about the line of his jaw.

Amos Stirling…?

She studied him carefully. He was much older than the boy from the postcard, but it was the same person—except that now he was dead. The Great Uncommon Bag must have delivered them to Amos; he’d just been following Selena.

Amos crouched, his eyes shifting from side to side. From his pocket he produced a glass conical flask containing a measure of glittering blue liquid and placed it on the cave floor. Out of his other pocket he took a lightbulb, which he balanced in the neck of the flask. Protecting his fist with his sleeve, he smashed the bulb.

Two streams of white light shot out, twirling in midair. They contorted into the shapes of two people—one hooded and wearing a mask, the other a woman with a long dark braid.

“A mixologist’s lightprint,” Valian whispered excitedly. “I’ve never actually seen one before. The light re-creates whatever just happened in this room.”

The hooded person began talking. “There will be no turning back, Miss Grimes. The process is irreversible.” He had a deep, coarse voice that set the liquid in the flask trembling. “The trade is simple: we will turn you into a ghoul and, in payment, you will serve us in any way we require.”

Ivy shuddered. Why on earth had Selena Grimes *asked* the Dirge to turn her into a ghoul? She watched curiously as Selena’s figure handed over what appeared to be a violin.

“Your soul will fracture in two,” the masked man told her, holding the instrument aloft. “The larger part will form a ghoul, but the other piece will remain trapped inside this object, which we shall keep. If you decide to break our agreement at any time, we will reconnect the two parts of your soul and you will become Departed. You will cease to be.”

Ivy couldn’t believe it. The Dirge could turn the living into the dead *and* they had mastered the secret of turning the dead into the Departed! Perhaps that was what all their forbidden research had amounted to.

Amos shook his head.

With a loud crackle, Selena’s form dissolved and another stream of light surged out of the broken bulb, shaping itself into a different person in a hood and mask.

The original masked man lowered his head. “My leader, Blackclaw. The contract with Selena Grimes is done.” Ivy realized with a sinking feeling that they had been joined by her great-grandfather Octavius Wrench: he was the Fallen Guild’s leader! “I am also pleased to announce the successful capture of two additional members of the Rasavatum. As with the others, if they will not swear loyalty, they will be disposed of.”

“Good work, Monkshood,” Blackclaw remarked in a clear, rich voice. “Pity about Amos Stirling. So talented a person would have been useful.

Still, the library is the only prize of interest. Given access to a thousand years of mixology, we can master the art ourselves.”

Ivy swallowed. The Dirge hadn’t persuaded the Rasavatum to serve them at all; they’d dismantled their guild, picking off members one by one—and Amos Stirling had been one of their victims.

A high-pitched metallic scrape resonated through the cave. Immediately Amos knocked the smashed bulb onto the floor and stowed the conical flask back in his pocket. The figures of light vaporized.

A circular stainless-steel panel appeared in the cave wall and started opening. Ivy pressed herself back against the pillar. The three of them were within sight of whoever was about to enter, but if they tried to move, Amos would see them. She pulled the Great Uncommon Bag out of her satchel, reminding herself that if they were discovered in 1967, the ramifications would be catastrophic.

“We’re going,” she decided. “Now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Crawling out into their room at the Cabbage Moon, Ivy found Seb and Valian glowering in the direction of the bunks.

"Johnny Hands?" she exclaimed, getting to her feet. The ghoul was sitting on her bed, his feet hovering a few inches off the floor. He glimpsed the Great Uncommon Bag and a line appeared between his brows.

"Welcome back," he said, adding, "I'm here to escort you to my master. We don't have much time."

Valian folded his arms. "Your *master*? I thought you were an independent scout, like me."

Ivy recalled her conversation with Johnny Hands in the infirmary. With everything that had happened since, she'd forgotten to tell Valian or Seb. "Why does Mr. Punch want to see us?"

Johnny Hands rose to his feet. "He will explain himself, but we have to be quick," he said urgently. "Follow me."

"Whoa—hold everything," Valian said, gesticulating wildly. "*You* work for *Mr. Punch*? Since when?"

Johnny Hands counted on his fingers. "Let me see…Probably for coming up on two hundred years." He went to open the door. After seeing him dissolve through the roof of the featherlight mailhouse, Ivy wasn't sure why he was bothering. "Now please, come along."

Seb scanned the room. "Hang on, where's Judy? She was meant to meet us here."

"Mr. Littlefair sent her on an errand," Johnny Hands said dismissively, brushing a hand through the air. "Now, I really must insist: *hurry!*"

Outside Mr. Punch's curiosity shop, a green silk ribbon was writing in the air:

Welcome, welcome, one and all! Curiosity awaits!

The last time Ivy had visited Mr. Punch's shop it was a small brick house—painted fig-purple—with a slate roof and wrought-iron shop sign. Inside, Ivy had discovered a collection of uncommon objects stored in glass cabinets, wooden trunks and jeweled chests.

That was then.

Facing Ivy *now* was a colossal purple big top, the kind you'd see at a circus, the peaks so steep and tall, they looked like a mountain range at dusk. Waving furiously atop each one was a white flag decorated with Mr. Punch's logo—a black top hat.

"I'll wait here," Johnny Hands said, hovering by the entrance.

Ivy smoothed down her kurta before heading in, Seb and Valian trudging along behind.

It was dark and quiet inside the tent. Boxes sat in shadow around the walls while, in the center, a white spotlight lit up the sandy floor. On either side stood two towers accessed by rope ladders, with a trapeze hanging between them. The sounds of Lundinor were muffled by the thick walls, so the crunch of their footsteps echoed loudly.

"Hello?" Ivy called.

There was a clatter, and then the spotlight moved slowly across the tent, coming to rest on a platform at the top of one of the towers. Ivy saw a man in a black top hat sitting there, his legs hanging over the edge.

"That's him," Valian said quietly. *"Mr. Punch."*

"It's safe to climb the ladder," a deep voice called down. "I knotted it myself."

Ivy surveyed the platform from a distance. It was a strange place to have a meeting—but, hey, this was Lundinor. At the foot of the rope ladder she swung her satchel around and began to climb, Seb and Valian following behind. From the top, the tent looked even bigger.

"Here you go," Mr. Punch said, shuffling along to make room. The platform was crammed with cases and boxes stuffed with uncommon objects. "Sorry about my collection—it never seems to fit in here as well as it does in a proper building."

Seb sat down beside a gray stone plinth, his knees drawn up to his chest. Valian shuffled up between a rusty oilcan and a large model sailboat. Ivy took the space beside Mr. Punch. "I was told that *you* were behind the transformation of Lundinor," she said, letting her legs hang over the edge like his. "Can't you just change the tent whenever you want?"

"Ah, but it doesn't work like that," Mr. Punch told her, tipping his hat to Seb and Valian. "Good to meet you both at last." He pointed to the plinth beside Seb. "That stone does all the work."

Ivy regarded the gray stone plinth. The pedestal was carved with winged horses and five-pointed stars, and an old book with yellowed pages was lying open on top of it. "The plinth?" she asked.

"You could call it a plinth," Mr. Punch said. "Over the centuries it's had many names: lectern, podium, easel…I call it a stone."

"Hang on—this plinth transforms the whole of Lundinor?" Seb leaned away from it, staring. "I don't understand."

"The stone is fond of books," Mr. Punch explained with a shrug. "If you lay one open on top of it, the stone manifests certain aspects of that book in real life."

Ivy considered the grassy meadows, trees and flowers growing in Lundinor; one uncommon plinth had done all that. "So you lay a different book on top of the stone every season?" she asked.

Mr. Punch opened a gleaming mother-of-pearl chest beside him. It was full of objects, including several leather-bound books. "A Dickens every winter," he explained. "That's traditional. Something sunny for spring—this year I used *Mary Poppins in the Park*—and in autumn it's whatever takes my fancy. The stone is very rare, as you can imagine. I wouldn’t be able to sell it for less than ten grade.”

There was a clatter as Valian knocked over the oilcan. “What?!”

Ivy felt like she’d just had the wind knocked out of her. She scanned the big top, checking they were still alone. There were only five objects in existence that had a ten-grade value. “The stone is one of the *Great Uncommon Good*?”

Mr. Punch’s eyes twinkled as he took a Russian doll out of the chest—a man in traditional Russian costume. “Let me tell you a little about where that phrase comes from,” he said, holding the doll on his flattened palm. “Many hundreds of years ago, when tales of five ten-grade objects first surfaced, one man decided to collect the stories together and give each object a name. The bag that you and your friends possess was called the Sack of Stars, and sitting behind us is the Stone of Dreams. It was this same man who named the objects the Great Uncommon Good, believing that they would do extraordinarily good things.”

The Sack of Stars. That’s what they should be calling it. Listening to the story, Ivy guessed that the Jar of Shadows still had its original name. She wondered what the other two objects might be.

“But of course the story collector soon realized that, in the wrong hands, the Great Uncommon Good could do extraordinarily *bad* things,” Mr. Punch continued, opening the Russian doll to reveal a set of ever-smaller figures. “So he set about forming a guild of uncommoners who would hunt down the five objects and keep them hidden from the rest of the world. The guild was called the Rasavatum.”

Ivy shared a look of confusion with Seb and Valian. “I thought the Rasavatum were mixologists.”

Mr. Punch blew on the Russian dolls and they began moving of their own accord. A lady in a red dress curtsied to Ivy; a man brushed down his suit, stretching his legs. “The original members *were* talented mixologists,” Mr. Punch explained. “They needed to conceal the work they were really doing, so they used their mixologist skills to build a reputation as a troupe of mysterious showmen. It allowed them to travel from undermart to undermart, gathering information on the Great Uncommon

Good without anyone knowing what they were really up to. It was a fantastic *disguise.*" At that word, the Russian dolls' faces froze and they jumped inside each other in ascending order of size, till only the original man remained. Mr. Punch tapped him on the head, smiling. "Over the centuries, members of the Rasavatum have come and gone, but two things remain: our masquerade as mixologists, and our promise to conceal the Great Uncommon Good."

"Our?" Seb cocked his head. "*You're* a member of the Rasavatum?"

Mr. Punch put the Russian doll back into the chest and closed the lid. "The very last one. The Dirge made it their mission to discover our identities and hunt us down, but it was against our oath to fight—we are a peaceful guild committed to nonviolence."

"So *that's* why the Rasavatum went into hiding," Ivy said. An army of questions marched into her head. She guessed there were few people Mr. Punch could trust with the truth, especially with half the Dirge's identities still a mystery. She peered into his swirling eyes, contemplating the multiple souls coexisting inside him. She couldn't imagine the extent of his knowledge or the number of secrets he was guarding.

"Sir Clement was a member of the Rasavatum," Mr. Punch said. "He used the Stone of Dreams to build Lundinor, and the object has been under the protection of our guild ever since. Fifty years ago another of our members tracked down the Jar of Shadows. Since then, I have endeavored to keep it out of the Dirge's reach."

Ivy blushed. "So it was *you* who hid it in the Skaptikon?"

Mr. Punch nodded solemnly. There was no anger on his face, only regret. He pulled his legs up onto the platform, turning around so he was facing Seb and Valian. "Under no circumstances must the Dirge be allowed to wield the power of one of the Great Uncommon Good. As guardians of the Sack of Stars, you three must keep it hidden from Selena at all costs."

Valian's expression hardened as he poked around in his inside pocket, checking that the Great Uncommon Bag—the Sack of Stars—was still there. "Selena Grimes—you know who she really is?"

"I have known since you three unmasked Cartimore Wrench as *Ragwort,*" Mr. Punch said with a scowl. "I discovered Selena's true identity by tracing the grim-wolf back to her. The creature has since left her employment."

"If you know who she is, why can't she be arrested?" Seb asked. "The underguard will believe *you*, surely."

"The underguard will *listen* to me," Mr. Punch agreed. "But they will not take action without proof. Selena Grimes won their trust years ago; it will not be brushed aside so easily. In any case, the entire force would be unable to stop her on their own." He fastened his cord jacket. "After I discovered Selena's true allegiance I began hunting for an object that I knew would vanquish her. Only this morning I got word that it has been found."

Ivy wondered what Mr. Punch could be talking about. She had the feeling that he knew everything they'd been getting up to over the last couple of days. Perhaps Johnny Hands had been spying on them.

"The reason I have summoned you here," Mr. Punch went on urgently, "is because I am leaving Lundinor immediately in order to retrieve the object. I hope to be back before the Grivens contest begins so I can stop Selena Grimes from opening the Jar of Shadows. Whatever happens while I'm gone, you must keep the Sack of Stars safe. I fear there are other members of the Dirge in Lundinor right now, and they will be watching you three."

Mr. Punch's story of the Rasavatum and his warning about the Dirge were still running through Ivy's head when she left the big top. Out on the lawn, people stood in small groups discussing the evening edition of the *Lundinor Chronicle*. Ivy couldn't see the headline, but she noticed a few of the traders gawping at her. A cold feeling seeped into her bones. "Er… What's going on?"

Valian's eyes narrowed. "I don't know, but I don't like the look of it."

Johnny Hands came shooting across the grass, his jester's hat wobbling. When he reached them, he dithered, apparently trying to tell them something, but in the end he just shook his head and held up a crisp copy of the *Lundinor Chronicle.*

On the front page was a photo of Ivy in the dungarees and cropped black jacket she'd been wearing yesterday. She was grinning from ear to ear, a large bronze trophy cradled in her arms.

Seb read the headline, his voice growing higher with every word. “ ‘*Eleven-Year-Old Girl Becomes Final Competitor in Grivens Contest’*?!”

Ivy was trying to gasp and speak at the same time. “But—that’s not me!” She grabbed the newspaper to examine it more closely. OK, it did look *exactly* like her, but unless she had an extreme sleepwalking problem that she didn’t know about, she hadn’t entered herself into the Grivens contest. There had to be another explanation.

“Shape-shifter,” Valian muttered bitterly. “It must be.”

Ivy scanned the article. “It says here that to enter the contest, players had to deposit one of their gloves in the contest master’s cup and then drink from it.”

“Yuck.” Seb pulled a face. “Soggy glove juice—what’s that all about?”

“The drinking part is customary,” Johnny Hands explained. “Grivens contests were always presided over by a contest master—a referee. They were chosen from a handful of retired ex-players, and it was traditional to use one of their old trophies as a cup into which new contestants could deposit their gloves.”

“The cup is uncommon,” Valian added. “Once a glove is placed inside, its owner is bound to enter the contest. Withdrawals are forbidden. If a player fails to show up…” He grimaced. “Well, you’ve seen what happens to people’s hands when they make a bad Trade—imagine that happening, but to *all of you*.”

As Ivy remembered Selena Grimes’s rotting hands, her throat became dry. “But—look,” she said, wiggling her fingers. “I’ve still got both my gloves.”

Johnny Hands studied them carefully. “That damage—has it always been there?”

Ivy appraised the small hole in the left thumb. She’d almost forgotten about it. “No. I snagged it on a branch a few days ago.”

“*What* did you say?” Valian asked.

Ivy held out her hand so he could see the hole for himself. “You remember—in the Great Oak Tree, at Sir Clement’s old house.”

"But…part of it's *missing,*" he said, throwing Johnny Hands an uneasy look.

"What does that mean?" Ivy asked slowly, already fearing the answer.

"It means that if we check inside the contest master's cup, we're likely to find a scrap of your glove," Johnny Hands said. "And the cup needs only a thread in order to register entry."

Valian stared at Ivy. "It means you're going to have to play, Ivy. Tonight."

As she recalled just how confusing the game in the carousel had been, Ivy's legs went weak. "But—I can't. I don't know how. I'll be—"

"Killed," Johnny Hands finished matter-of-factly. "And though I hate to point out the obvious, that's exactly what whoever is behind this deception wants."

Suddenly they heard a commotion behind them. Ivy spun around as excited shouts filled the air. A large group of people were running backward onto the lawn. As heads turned, Ivy recognized some of the faces—they were journalists from the *Barrow Post.* Some were shaking snow globes while others were holding feathers, scribbling madly in midair. A few of them rushed to join the crowd as it parted.

Selena Grimes appeared in their midst. Her dark hair had been styled into an elaborate braided updo and she was wearing a long silver gown with flared sleeves, like a medieval queen. Ivy recalled Mr. Punch's warning to keep the Sack of Stars away from the Dirge. Immediately she grabbed Seb's sleeve and turned to run.

"Well, this *is* fortuitous!" Selena declared. "We are joined by our final contestant!"

Ivy froze as several photographers broke from the pack to swarm around her, shaking their snow globes in her face. She cowered, shielding her face.

"Stop it! Go away!" Seb tried to elbow them aside—but there were too many.

Selena Grimes glided toward her, the horde following.

"Ivy Sparrow," she said in a honeyed voice, "may I offer my sincerest congratulations." She hovered closer and spread her arms wide as if to give Ivy a hug.

Ivy went rigid with shock. She tried to step back, but there was a journalist right behind her. Selena’s cold, hard arms came around her shoulders. Ivy gave a muffled shriek but was too angry and scared to even move.

Selena’s cold breath kissed Ivy’s cheek as she lowered her lips to Ivy’s ear. At an almost imperceptible volume she said, “Enjoy the game, child. It’ll be the last you ever play.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Valian's eyes flicked from left to right as he checked the contest rules. The newspaper supplement was so long, the paper flapped over his shoulder like a scarf in the wind. "Here it is—they're operating a forfeit system. Living players are allowed to have a spotter with them to stop them from being killed." His face brightened as he turned to Ivy. "You're gonna be fine."

She gave him a doubtful smile, keeping her head down as they approached the House of Bells. Everyone was staring at her. She wished she could become invisible like one of the dead.

"What does this spotter thing entail?" Seb asked, peering over Valian's shoulder. "Could *I* do it?"

Valian read back through the rules. "Ivy has to play the game by herself, but the spotter stands behind her, outside the chalk circle, and pulls her out of the Krigvelt if it appears she isn't going to make it."

Seb shrugged. "OK…that's doable. Valian's right, Ivy. You're gonna survive this."

Ivy held out her hand. Her fingers and thumb were trembling so much, she could see ten of them. "If Selena Grimes is behind this, I don't think it matters *what* we do," she said quietly. She glanced warily at Johnny Hands, wondering if it was wise to reveal everything they knew about Selena Grimes and the Dirge….If he had earned Mr. Punch's confidence, she reckoned he could be trusted. "She's probably devised a plan to get rid of the three of us once and for all." Now that she thought it through, it all made sense—the shape-shifter who had impersonated her must have been Jack-in-the-Green.

Seb gritted his teeth. “Can’t Mr. Punch stop this?” he asked Johnny Hands. “He’s meant to be the most powerful man in Lundinor.”

“Unsurprisingly I’m a step ahead of you there,” Johnny Hands replied, adjusting his gloves. “As soon as I read the headline, I sent Mr. Punch a featherlight. It must have been only moments after he’d left Lundinor. I’ve received no response as yet.”

Ivy paused on the steps to the House of Bells. She could only hope that, wherever Mr. Punch had gone, he’d find what he needed and get back in time to stop Selena. As she opened the shop door, the bells inside sprang into fevered conversation. They trembled as she passed, chattering about the Grivens contest. Ivy tried to ignore them.

“Ivy?!” a voice cried. “Is that you?” The door at the back swung open with a bang, and Ethel rushed out, her headscarf flapping. Under her arm she was carrying a square piece of wood.

She stopped in front of them, hesitating. She frowned at Valian and Johnny Hands, then turned to Ivy. Her lip wobbled. “I’ve been to the underguard station. Your gran is still at the mansion; she asked to stay behind after they left. I’ve sent her three featherlights already, but I think they’re having trouble getting through. I’d go and fetch her myself if the place would let me.”

Ivy knew that the Wrench Mansion would only reveal itself to a member of the family; it had been built with uncommon bricks that liked to move—that was no doubt part of the problem.

Seb slung down his rucksack. “Maybe I can use the saltshaker. If Granma’s still got the pepper pot with her, we might be able to see what’s going on.”

“Good thinking.” Ethel pointed to the desk at the rear of the shop. “Do it over there. We need the space ’ere to practice.” She held out the piece of wood—a chopping board.

Ivy edged away.

“Now don’t worry—it’s a common one,” Ethel said. “I just thought we should sit down and review everything. The contest begins at eight;

that means we’ve got a little under two hours.” She raised an eyebrow at Johnny Hands. “As you’re ’anging around, you can ’elp. I’m a little rusty with Grivens. I s’pose you’ve played it before?”

He smoothed down his waistcoat. “Madam, I’ve been playing it for the best part of five centuries.”

Ethel pursed her lips. “Well then.”

They sat cross-legged in the middle of the shop floor, with Johnny Hands hovering above it. He spread a handful of wooden figures across the chopping board in the middle. “Every Grivens game begins in the same way.”

Ivy tried to ignore her nerves and pay attention. Having seen the game played on the carousel, she found some of what Johnny Hands told her familiar.

“Each player chooses a bell, a suitcase and a glove from a box of Grivens pieces.”

“Does it make any difference which pieces you choose?” Ivy asked.

Johnny Hands twisted a bell piece between his fingers. “Yes, but there is no way of telling which piece will be strongest; it’s all down to luck.”

Ivy’s spirits sank. “I see.” It was like most card games—there was no way to control the hand you were dealt, only what you did with each card afterward.

Johnny Hands rotated the chopping board. “When all four players have chosen their first piece to put in the red zone, the board is spun to activate the next stage of play.”

“In the Krigvelt,” Ivy remembered. She would never forget seeing Seb appear on the helipad of that skyscraper.

“The Krigvelt will be in a different place every time,” Ethel explained, “with different challenges. I’ve ’eard of everything from a tropical island and an underground sewer to the top of a mountain. You ’ave to withstand the dangers of the environment, not just the attacks from the other players.”

“When you go into the Krigvelt, your first aim is survival,” Johnny Hands told Ivy. “You have to work out what your Grivens pieces can do—they might be able to attack one of your enemies or protect you from attack. Each Grivens piece has a different characteristic. Gloves are usually defensive, while suitcases are attacking. But there are exceptions.”

Ivy recalled Seb finding an American football helmet in his suitcase.

“Bells are the weird ones,” Valian added. “I’ve been reading about famous Grivens games, and bells can mess with your mind. Some of them have hypnotic voices—they make you so disorientated you can’t defend yourself.”

Johnny Hands cleared the board. “If you survive your first visit to the Krigvelt, you play again with your remaining two pieces. Occasionally, games aren’t over even after three rounds—so you keep picking pieces until one player is victorious.”

Ivy tried to store the information into her memory. It was like cramming for the world’s worst exam.

“It’s a pity there’s no way to cheat,” Seb remarked. He was holding up the saltshaker. “I can only see shadows with this. I guess the mansion is blocking it somehow.”

Ivy’s forehead crinkled. She hoped Granma Sylvie was safe.

“Actually there *is* a way to cheat at Grivens,” Johnny Hands announced. He pointed at the wooden pieces on the board and Ivy looked at them again. “Grivens pieces are made of common materials—paper, stone, plastic. However, you can use *uncommon* materials—the marble from an uncommon statue, the wood from an uncommon table leg. Playing with an uncommon piece puts you at an advantage because it tends to be more powerful in the Krigvelt.”

“If only there was a way for us to smuggle some into the stadium,” Ethel muttered. Ivy wasn’t sure if she was being serious.

Seb placed a hand on Ivy’s shoulder. “Hey, we’ve faced worse situations than this…right?”

She forced a smile, thinking of the one thing everyone seemed to be forgetting: it wasn’t her surviving the Grivens contest they had to worry about—it was the Dirge opening the Jar of Shadows in the stadium.

The light from the cave ceiling had faded and the evening air was cool. As the five of them made their way through the West End, Ivy’s feet felt like lead. Underguards stood at street corners, directing the last few spectators toward the Grivens stadium. She could hear the noise of the crowd—like a distant storm—growing louder as they approached.

She rubbed her neck. “I guess I should say thank you,” she muttered to Johnny Hands, floating beside her. “For the Grivens advice.”

He tipped his hat at her. “You’re welcome. I forgot to mention—Selena Grimes doesn’t know that you’re a whisperer. Perhaps you can use that to your advantage.”

Ivy didn’t know how. She peered into his dark eyes, something puzzling her. “Can I ask you a question? It might sound stupid….” With her attention focused on the contest, Ivy hadn’t had time to analyze what she’d seen in 1967. She was still trying to understand why Selena would have gone to the Dirge to be turned into a ghoul. “Do you *like* being dead?”

“Do I *like* it?” Johnny Hands chuckled, wiping a tear from his eye. “You are funny.”

“Well…?” Ivy was still waiting for an answer.

“Being dead has allowed me to see much more of this fine world than is possible in one lifetime,” Johnny Hands said. “And I’ve been fortunate enough to call some extraordinary people friends.”

Ivy could feel a “but” coming.

He pointed to his shoes, which were hovering over the dusty road. “And yet despite all that I haven’t felt grass under my feet or sand between my toes for five hundred years. I can’t sleep, which means I can no longer dream, and everyone I once loved is Departed.” His expression hardened. “The answer to your question—whether I do or do not like my situation—is irrelevant. This is my *forever.*”

Ivy looked away, worried that her question had been insensitive. She hadn’t meant to upset him.

All at once they saw lights flickering at the end of the road and Johnny Hands stopped. “The stadium is only a block away now. It’s time for me to go.” He raised a hand over Ivy’s head, unsure what to do, then ruffled her hair. “Farewell, Ivy Sparrow, and good luck.”

Johnny Hands dissolved into thin air, and at the next corner the Grivens stadium came into view. It looked like a huge conservatory with a domed roof, the colored shapes of thousands of people moving behind the misty glass. Spiky-leafed exotic plants were arranged on the lawns outside, depicting the three Grivens pieces—the glove, the bell and the suitcase.

There was a massive throng of people still lining up to go in, and a bank of reporters stood beside a green carpet, shaking snow globes at glitzy stars in outrageous Hobsmatch who glided past, waving to the masses. Stationed around the stadium, platoons of underguards observed everything stoically, toilet brushes strapped to their chests rather than tucked into their belts.

Ivy took off her satchel and gave it to Valian for safekeeping. "I'll be watching," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You can do it. I know you can."

"And I'll keep trying your gran," Ethel said, patting the top pocket of her overalls, which was stuffed with feathers.

When Ivy turned to Seb, he hugged her so hard she almost fell over. "I'll see you at the table."

Ivy was shown into a room furnished with iron patio chairs and tables topped with teacups, saucers and pots of tea that smelled of honey and lavender.

The fifteen other contestants were already there. Some were sitting twiddling their thumbs, while others paced to and fro or chatted nervously with their opponents.

On a table in a corner stood an ornate bronze trophy. *The contest master's cup*—Ivy recognized it from the newspaper. A ribbon floated above it, writing again and again:

Contestants: you may collect your returned gloves.

Ivy pretended to be interested in a cup of tea. The contents of one pot smelled a bit like Raider's Tonic, so she poured herself a cup and sipped it slowly as she skirted the room, trying to stay out of people's way. She went to examine a notice board:

ORDER OF PLAY

TABLE 1: *Marcia Bow, Carson Crevitch, Ferdinand La Garde, Hui Hang*

TABLE 2: *Emiliano Agustin, Claudia-Rose Winters, François Filigree, Sid Irons*

TABLE 3: *Alexander Brewster, Bruno Cartwright, Lei Chang, Jorgen Valentine*

TABLE 4: *Lady Margaret Crammington, Ivy Sparrow, Colin Mint, Captain Macintosh*

FINAL TABLE: *winner of table 1, winner of table 2, winner of table 3, winner of table 4*

Ivy did a double take as she read through the names.

Alexander Brewster…?

But—after the fire at the alehouse, why would Alexander want to be involved in the contest? Another name caught her eye too.

François Filigree.

She spotted his strange white mask as he spoke to two women in satin ball gowns, and it set her worrying. François Filigree was the only other person who had seen her glove being damaged; he could have been involved in the plot to enter Ivy's name in the contest. She needed to be wary of him.

She scanned the room and saw Alexander sitting on his own. His apron was missing; instead he was wearing a smart gray suit with rubber boots. His scruffy red hair had been combed and flattened against his head with what looked like cooking grease.

Ivy took the seat next to him. "Hey," she said. "I didn't know you'd be playing."

Dark circles ringed Alexander's eyes. "My pa entered me," he groaned. "He taught me how to play when I was little. He said we could use the publicity…even if it was dangerous."

Drummond Brewster was so cruel, Ivy thought. Did he not care about his son at all? She hesitated before saying, “It was *you* who really invented Dragon’s Breath Ale….I don’t know why your dad kept it secret; I think it’s amazing.”

Alexander’s shoulders slumped.

Ivy bit her lip, searching for something less awkward to talk about. “Er—how’s the alehouse?”

“I’m in charge of the cleanup. It’s taking ages. Pa’s been selling Dragon’s Breath Ale from a temporary stall out front, but the customers aren’t interested in buying anything from us now. They keep saying he’s a fraud.”

A man with freckled apricot skin and floppy black hair entered the room and cleared his throat. He was dressed in a burgundy and yellow uniform with sponsorship logos plastered all over it.

“Who’s that?” Ivy asked.

“The contest master,” Alexander told her. “Nix Wolf. He’s a nine-time American Grivens champion. Oh, and a ghoul.”

“All right, ladies and gents, time to head into the arena,” Nix Wolf said in a smooth Texan drawl. “Those of you who have spotters—it’s forbidden for you to look around or talk to them after we leave this room.”

Ivy followed Alexander and the other contestants into the stadium. She blinked in the glare of the harsh uncommon lights as the *thud* of a thousand snow globes filled her ears. The tiered seating climbed the walls of the glass house, screening out anything happening in the undermart outside. The noise from the spectators was deafening.

In the center of the arena stood four high tables, spaced sixty or so feet apart. Each had a chalk circle drawn around it and a varnished wooden chopping board sitting on top.

Ivy steeled herself as Nix Wolf directed contestants to their respective tables. She took her place at table four, her hands sweating inside her gloves. As her opponents gathered around her, she felt a growing sense of unease. It was fairly straightforward to match each of the faces at her table with the names on the notice board.

On her right, a neatly dressed gray-haired gentleman in a red bow tie was, she guessed, Colin Mint—but only because the man on her left—who had blond dreadlocks and an eye patch—was surely Captain Macintosh. Lady Crammington, opposite, was a bejeweled woman with a pinched face and wearing a peacock-feather hat.

A small fanfare sounded, and then a woman carrying a flag decorated with Grivens pieces appeared on the arena floor. Behind her followed a line of excited uncommoners who were jumping up and down and waving to the audience. Only one of them looked unhappy to be there: Seb.

When the spotters reached the Grivens tables, they took their places. Captain Macintosh was the only other player on table four to have a spotter, so Ivy knew he must be alive. She stretched an arm out behind her to see whether Seb was within touching distance, but felt nothing. Assessing the positions of the other spotters, she gathered that he was standing more than an arm's length away….

But not so far that she couldn't hear him.

"You're gonna be fine," he murmured. "Just try to think clearly. You're good at that."

Easier said than done when you're in this stadium, Ivy thought.

"See the second row of the stand in front of you?" he added quickly.

Ivy scanned the seating and picked out Judy and Mr. Littlefair. They had made a banner from a strip of uncommon wallpaper, which kept folding itself into different messages: YOU CAN DO IT, IVY SPARROW! WE BELIEVE IN YOU!

She gave a glum smile. She was either about to prove them right or come to a decidedly messy end playing the world's most dangerous board game.

"Valian's in the stand on our right," Seb said. "Third row back in the middle. Next to a woman with a yellow hat."

Ivy searched and found Valian sitting hunched over with his hands in his pockets, scowling. The woman beside him kept waving toward the arena, shaking the feathers of her yellow bonnet in his face.

"I can't see Mr. Punch," Seb added flatly. "I'll keep searching."

When all competitors had taken their seats, Nix Wolf picked up a conch shell and announced the opening of the contest. There was a huge round of applause and everyone stamped their feet. Ivy's legs shuddered as the vibrations worked their way up through the floor. Her heart was racing.

The spectators hushed as four frilly tablecloths flopped down from the conservatory roof and hovered in midair. Everyone turned toward them as images appeared on their surface. *Materializers*. Ivy glimpsed herself in HD and resisted the temptation to cover her face with her hands. Her eyes were puffy and her messy curls were sticking to her pale forehead; it looked as if she had a fever. She wouldn't have blamed the audience for assuming she was a race of the dead, if she hadn't had a spotter with her.

She lowered her gaze to the chopping board and ran over what Ethel and Johnny Hands had told her. Nix Wolf passed by each table with a box of approved Grivens pieces. When it was Ivy's turn to choose, she shakily pushed her gloved hand inside and wiggled it around. It was easy to tell which piece was which: suitcases had sharp corners, bells were round and gloves had fingers. The stadium was nearly silent now. Ivy could feel the eyes of a hundred thousand uncommoners on her as she made her decision. Hoping that luck was on her side, she removed one of each piece and placed all three on the black area of the chopping board.

She started when she realized what she'd chosen. The glove piece was ornate, carved from a glassy purple stone a bit like amethyst. The bell had been turned from pale wood and the suitcase appeared to be made of stiff lightweight cardboard.

She studied her opponents' pieces as each placed them on the board. Some were fairly plain, while others were covered in gold leaf or studded with gems. Each time a piece was laid down, an "Oooh" rang out around the stadium and a close-up appeared on the materializers.

Nix Wolf cleared his throat. "Players, choose your first piece."

Ivy steadied her nerves and tried to ignore Colin Mint, who was flexing his fingers while sizing up his pieces—before finally choosing his suitcase. The other opponents made their decisions without hesitating, each pushing a piece forward. Lady Crammington chose an ebony glove while Captain Macintosh picked a wicker suitcase. A chorus of gasps and boos filled the stadium. Ivy hastily nudged her bell forward.

Nix Wolf grinned as, still standing outside the chalk circle, he used a long stick to spin the chopping board. Ivy tried to catch a glimpse of Seb on a materializer before she entered the Krigvelt, but all too soon the stadium, with its bright lights and roaring stands, vanished.

The air shifted.

Ivy found herself in a large glass tank, somewhere underwater. Outside, she could see shoals of fish flitting through the glittering depths, but beyond them everything faded into shadow. The Grivens table and chopping board were bolted to the floor, the chalk outline smeared on the outside of the glass. The muffled echoes of the ocean filled her ears, while a salty tang permeated her nostrils.

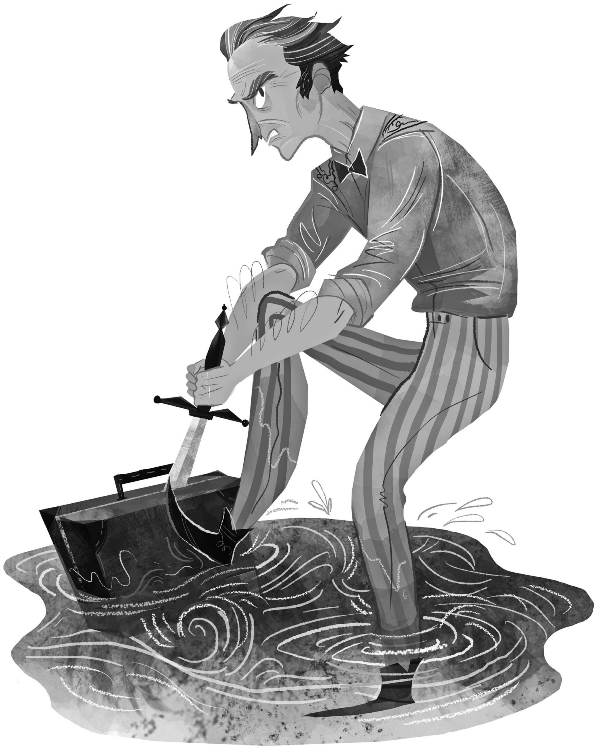
She gripped the Grivens table for support. Her head felt woozy, as if she might faint at any moment, but her opponents showed no sign of discomfort.

The Grivens pieces wobbled—and then there was a disturbingly loud *crack*, and seawater began trickling through fractures in the glass onto the floor.

Ivy's chest constricted. She knew she wasn't the strongest swimmer; if the room filled up, they'd have to do combat in water.

Before she had time to really panic, the two suitcase pieces on the chopping board unfolded like origami boxes, reminding Ivy of the matchbox archive at the *Barrow Post*.

A miniature gleaming metal sword appeared in Colin Mint's suitcase, while a burning branch rose out of Captain Macintosh's. The items flickered like images on a TV and disappeared before reappearing full-sized in the hands of Colin Mint and Captain Macintosh. Both players' faces were set as they swung the objects defensively to and fro between Ivy and Lady Crammington.



Ivy leaned away as heat from the burning branch swept past her cheek. She splashed her way toward the chalk line, but when her foot came into contact with it, she felt herself being pushed back and went sliding over the wet floor. Johnny Hands had warned her about this. She wouldn't be able to leave the circle, even if someone *was* wielding a burning branch. Seb was the only one who could pull her out.

Come on, little bell, she thought, glancing at her Grivens piece. *Please do something awesome.*

Opposite, Lady Crammington's ebony glove flexed its fingers. It wiggled them in the direction of Captain Macintosh, and a jet of water shot toward him, dousing the burning branch. As the flames were extinguished, the jet grew stronger. Captain Macintosh gasped for air and staggered backward, arms flailing.

There was a loud *pop,* and then he disappeared. As there was no trace of him in the Krigvelt, Ivy reasoned that his spotter must have pulled him out.

She looked at her feet. The seawater was up to her knees now, the icy cold making her toes numb.

Ignoring Ivy, Colin Mint turned his long sword on Lady Crammington. As he lunged forward, her glove piece made a “stop” sign and the sword simply *froze*. Colin Mint tugged on the handle, desperately trying to move the blade, but it was as if it had become lodged in the air.

Lady Crammington grinned maliciously and slammed her fist down on the chopping board, her glove piece mimicking her. Colin Mint stumbled back through the rising water as from out of nowhere a swinging blade appeared in front of him, cutting forcefully through the air and disturbing the water below.

Ivy turned her head away just before the blade hit home. She expected some sort of gruesome noise to follow, but instead there was another loud *pop*.

When she looked around again, Colin Mint had vanished and Lady Crammington was glowering at Ivy—the last player standing between her and the final.

Ivy stared at her bell piece, willing it to do something. The water was almost at her waist now and she was freezing. She wasn’t sure she’d even be able to move, let alone swim. Lady Crammington made a punching action with her fist and the glove piece copied her, aiming for Ivy’s bell.

Ivy thought of Seb before squeezing her eyes shut and preparing for the impact.

Where is he?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The force hit Ivy's bell and then crashed into her, leaving her winded. She bent over, holding her stomach, the pain spreading to her chest.

"Stop!" she called, hoping Lady Crammington might pause and at least give her time to think. The water was so cold; the surface bubbled as more water rushed in through the cracks in the glass tank. The stench of the sea was beginning to make Ivy feel sick.

She reached for the edge of the Grivens table and heaved herself upright. Her bell was still swaying with the force of the blow….

And then it started to sing. There were no words as such, just sounds. The bell had an operatic voice that filled the air, making the water tremble. As the vibrations traveled through Ivy's body, the cold she'd felt faded away. The sound energized her tired muscles, sharpening her mind and relaxing her. She didn't know what it was doing exactly, but it felt amazing.

Opposite her, she saw that the bell's voice was having a very different effect on Lady Crammington, who looked as if she was battling to stay awake. Her glove piece drooped and then lay flat on the Grivens board. Lady Crammington yawned and slipped down into the water. As it began lapping at the chopping board, just under Ivy's armpits, Lady Crammington faded away like smoke.

Ivy tilted her head back as the water reached her throat. *"Seb?!"*

Everything went dark—and then the Grivens stadium took shape around her. The spectators roared. Ivy gasped with relief as the water disappeared.

“In the first round, winner of table four, using a bell to disarm her opponents,” Nix Wolf shouted, “Ivy Sparrow!”

Ivy’s head pounded. Her tunic and cargo trousers were soaking wet. Her damp face appeared in close-up on one of the materializers as the crowd began chanting, “Ivy! Ivy! Ivy!”

Her cheeks glowed. She wasn’t used to uncommoners shouting her name in a *good* way.

“Yes!” Seb cheered, behind her.

She could see him on the materializers, punching the air and jumping up and down. “I *knew* that bell of yours would do something! Valian said it was bells you had to look out for.”

Ivy’s knees almost buckled with shock. All right—she’d survived that game, but only by luck.

There was no longer anyone at her Grivens table, so she searched for her three opponents. Captain Macintosh was being propped up by his spotter; he was coughing up water as if he’d nearly drowned. Colin Mint was being bandaged by a team of medics, while Lady Crammington was lying snoring on the stadium floor.

Ivy checked the other Grivens tables. Not all players had been so fortunate; two contestants from table two were being carried out of the stadium on stretchers, their spotters pale-faced and trembling.

Nix Wolf announced the winners of the three other tables. Their games had all lasted at least two rounds; only Ivy’s had been over after the first. She was surprised but delighted to find that Alexander Brewster had beaten his opponents on table three. Their eyes met as his face was projected onto a materializer, and he smiled with relief. Carson Crevitch was the winner of table one and, with a sinking feeling, Ivy saw that François Filigree was table two’s champion.

As the winners took their places around the final table, an eerie silence came over the stadium. Ivy combed the stands, searching for Mr. Punch. He should be back by now. She spotted Selena Grimes sitting in a VIP area, surrounded by other traders wearing elaborate Hobsmatch. The Jar of Shadows wasn’t with her; Ivy wondered where she was hiding it.

Focusing on the game again, she smiled glumly at Alexander Brewster opposite. She couldn’t believe that he had no spotter. Using her whispering, she checked to see if he was alive. The silence confirmed it.

Without a spotter, Alexander was putting himself in great danger. He gazed into the audience, his arms trembling. Ivy assumed he was looking for his father.

François Filigree stood on tiptoe, trying to see over the table. Ivy wished she had X-ray vision so she could see the expression behind his Noh mask.

Nix Wolf cleared his throat into the uncommon conch shell. “Let the final game COMMENCE!”

Goose pimples rippled across Ivy’s skin; she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

As Nix Wolf offered Alexander the first choice of Grivens pieces, Ivy studied Carson Crevitch. He had no spotter, so she checked with her whispering: he was one of the dead.

Nix Wolf handed the box of Grivens pieces to Filigree. Ivy concentrated hard, trying to block out the noise from the stadium. Filigree selected a glove, a suitcase and a bell carved from dark red wood and placed them on the chopping board. The spectators oohed and aahed, but Ivy didn’t hear them.

What she heard was a very different sound: a hushed voice. It didn’t drift around like the whispers of the dead; it sounded muffled, trapped. Ivy scanned the Grivens table. The only uncommon object on it was meant to be the chopping board, but this garbled voice originated somewhere else.

Filigree’s bell—she was sure of it; she’d practiced enough with her abilities to pinpoint where it was coming from. *It’s uncommon.*

From what Johnny Hands had told her, she knew that Filigree must be cheating. Perhaps he’d planted the uncommon bell in the box before the contest. She already suspected him of being up to no good; he could be working for Selena Grimes. With a sickening jolt, Ivy considered the possibility that Selena had ordered Filigree to kill her during the game….

A cold feeling washed over her. There was no way Seb could know that Filigree’s bell was uncommon. Ivy could only hope that he had the sense to pull her out of the chalk circle before things got really bad.

“Ahem.” Nix Wolf coughed, holding out the box of Grivens pieces toward Ivy.

She shook her head and put her hand inside. Her fingers curled around three pieces. She pulled them out and placed them on the Grivens board. She’d chosen a bell and glove carved from red marble, and a small white polystyrene suitcase.

While Carson Crevitch made his choice, Ivy weighed her options, trying to work out the best way to deal with Filigree’s uncommon bell piece.

Without a spotter, there was a real risk that Alexander would be killed when Filigree played that bell. Perhaps if she could warn him somehow, the two of them could work together. She tried to attract Alexander’s attention with a cough, but he was focused on his Grivens pieces.

The light in the stadium dimmed and a spotlight fell across the board. Ivy imagined the uncommoners watching the game all around the world, engrossed in her every move. Through the glass roof she could see that it was pitch-black outside in Lundinor. Inside the stadium, technicians whizzed around on uncommon rugs, directing lemon squeezers toward the action.

Fans leaped to their feet, waving. Ivy heard a ripple of shouts of “Ivy Sparrow!” *Uncommoners I’ve never even met before, willing me to do well.* She used their voices to steady her nerves as she turned back to the chopping board.

Nix Wolf’s voice whipped around the stadium like a gust of wind. “Let the first round begin!”

Ivy had no idea which piece to play. If Valian was in her shoes right now, he would probably pick the bell, whereas Seb would go for something more likely to attack—the glove. Instead, Ivy pushed the suitcase forward. Her opponents had already made their decisions: Alexander his glove, Crevitch a bell, and Filigree, of course, his uncommon bell.

Nix Wolf spun the board.

Learning from the last game, Ivy grabbed the edge of the Grivens table to stabilize herself. The dark stadium swirled out of focus and she saw a rich orange sunset against a purple sky. Blue sand dunes appeared—along with a fearsome howling wind. Ivy found herself on a small wooden platform at the top of a shady dune….

In a desert.

She took stock of her opponents. Carson Crevitch was standing with legs apart and arms outstretched, ready to leap into combat. Alexander had a steely glint in his eye, though his thin frame was shaking. Filigree's mask revealed nothing.

The Grivens pieces lay still. Then, with an unimpressive flutter, Ivy's polystyrene suitcase flapped open and a rusty metal shield appeared in her arms.

She slumped with disappointment. She didn't know what she'd been hoping for exactly; she just knew that a medieval knight's shield wasn't it. Still, she adjusted the leather strap over her arm and aimed it toward the other three players, preparing herself.

Alexander's glove flexed its fingers, made a fist and then slammed down onto the chopping board with a loud *bang!*

Three giant cracks appeared in the wooden platform under the table, each snaking toward one of Alexander's opponents. Ivy steadied herself as the ground rumbled. The wind over the dunes picked up, the platform trembling beneath her feet. The crevasses were deep; she guessed that if she fell in, it would be the end of her game. She clutched her shield tightly, bracing herself as the fissure reached her toes.

Her shield wobbled, but the fault line came to a stop. She gave a crooked smile. Maybe the rusty piece of metal on her arm wasn't so useless after all.

Filigree managed to outjump his crevice on unnaturally springy legs, though it left him stranded on a wooden island a few yards from the table. Judging from Carson Crevitch's darting eyes, he hadn't formulated a plan to avoid Alexander's attack—when his bell piece rang out and the wood stopped splintering.

Crevitch smiled wickedly as an imperious voice emerged from the bell, talking in a language Ivy didn't understand. Outside the chalk circle, a mass of skinny black-and-yellow snakes wriggled out of the sand, their tongues tasting the air.

Ivy turned her back on the Grivens table and directed her shield toward the snakes, though she didn't know what good it would do. She looked over her shoulder at her opponents: Alexander had managed to hop onto a snake-free island, but Filigree wasn't reacting at all. Instead, his legs jerked; it looked as if there was something trapped under his jacket.

As the snakes crossed over into the chalk circle, Ivy flattened herself against the Grivens table, her shield trembling on her arm. Alexander was shouting. Only Filigree's uncommon bell was left to play. Ivy doubted that her shield would be powerful enough to protect her from it; Alexander was already defenseless; and Carson Crevitch's snakes might not help him at all.

She thought of calling for Seb to pull her out, but she knew that he would only be able to save *her*—not Alexander or Crevitch.

There was time to attempt one last thing: Ivy stretched out with her whispering toward Filigree's bell piece. The murmured voice coming from inside the bell clanged around furiously, as if it was trying to escape. Ivy tried something new: she reduced her field of awareness to concentrate her senses *inside* the bell. Immediately the voice became clearer.

Strike. Defeat. Destroy…

She could hear words! She'd never been able to distinguish what the voices inside uncommon objects were actually saying before.

Just then, Filigree leaped for the table and made a grab for his bell. A piercing scream shot out of it—full of rage and pain. Ivy put her hands over her ears, the sounds reverberating through her mind. She felt a wave of heat as a wall of black-and-purple flames rose around the chalk circle. *Blackfire.*

Filigree was laughing behind his mask, his small gloved hands stroking his wobbling belly. The dark flames seemed to lick off him, causing no damage whatsoever. Ivy could see that something was still wriggling under his jacket, struggling to be free.

The snakes thrashed around and buried themselves in the cold sand. Heat singed Ivy's clothes, but they were so wet from the previous round, they didn't catch fire. She hid her face behind her shield, gasping for air. Smoke was seeping into her lungs, stinging the back of her throat.

And the flames were getting stronger.

"Seb!" she cried. "Seb!"

She heard a loud *pop,* and an unmistakable silhouette appeared behind the blackfire.

"Seb!" she wheezed.

He was floundering on the other side of the flames, waving his arms and jumping up and down. Ivy wasn't sure what was going on, but it looked as if he couldn't get through.

Cowering behind her shield, she realized that Filigree's uncommon bell piece must have had something to do with it. Maybe this had been Filigree's plan all along—to prevent Ivy's spotter from saving her.

She knew that if there was no way for her to be rescued, she only had one option left.

I've got to stop that bell.

Her body was weak; she needed oxygen. She summoned all her energy and reached out with her senses till she found the bell's voice amidst the roar of the flames. She'd never heard anything so angry, so intent on destruction.

Strike them down. Defeat all. Destroy…

As a last resort she decided to try to reason with it, though she'd never communicated with the trapped soul inside an object before. Gasping for air, she managed to project words at the bell, but it didn't seem to understand her. Then she tried soothing thoughts, memories of soft music and still water, a clear blue sky, a peaceful ocean—all the things that made her feel calm.

Strike. Defeat…Tired…Desperate…

Slowly the voice grew tranquil. Ivy heard it mumbling in exhausted tones and sighing. She heaved cold air into her lungs as she peered out from behind her shield. The flames were subsiding.

"WHAT IS THIS?!" Filigree shouted. Ivy lowered her shield slightly and saw that he was hitting the Grivens bell, attempting to make the flames return.

“No!” Ivy yelled. She concentrated on the bell with all her might, trying to comfort the soul trapped within it. She could feel it growing angrier—not at her and the other two competitors, but at the person who was hitting it.

All at once blackfire shot up behind Filigree. He cursed the bell and started to bat the flames away with his fire-retardant gloves. Alexander and Carson Crevitch shuffled to the edge of the chalk circle, not sure what was going on—but scarcely able to believe their luck. Ivy studied Filigree closely. His white mask had started to melt in the heat, and a face was emerging beneath it….

A very *green* face.

Six spindly legs burst free of Filigree’s stomach, and the spiky, mantis-like body of Jack-in-the-Green sprang out of the torn overcoat. What was left of the furniture trader’s Japanese Noh mask dripped like milk over the assassin’s smooth green features.

Ivy stumbled back. François Filigree had been *Jack-in-the-Green* all along! But why had he used a costume to disguise himself, rather than shape-shifting? A large blue vase appeared behind Jack-in-the-Green’s spindly legs—the same size and shape to have been smuggled in under Filigree’s clothes.

Ivy recognized it immediately: *the Jar of Shadows.*

She had to get hold of it somehow. Jack-in-the-Green growled and lunged at her with his barbed pincers, but a barricade of black-and-purple flames rose up between the two of them, stopping him just in time.

Ivy knew she needed to act before he could open the jar. She reached out with her senses to the Grivens bell. Its voice was confused and frantic, intent on destroying Jack-in-the-Green. Before she had time to do anything about it, the fire gave one last roar, drowning out all other sounds—and then Jack-in-the-Green was engulfed in flames….

Immediately her surroundings changed. The smoky purple desert vanished and the spitting of flames was silenced. Instead, raucous applause and angry shouts spread through the air. They were back in the stadium.

People were pointing and jeering. An underguard troop ran onto the stadium floor toward Jack-in-the-Green, who was shouting angrily, his skin charred and smoking. The Jar of Shadows was still standing on the other side of the Grivens table, unharmed.

Nix Wolf came forward and announced, “Our champion is…” He hesitated.

Ivy saw her face appear on a materializer and was surprised that she didn’t look worse. Her skin was sooty, her hair frazzled and singed, but she didn’t have a scratch on her. That ancient shield must have protected her better than she’d expected. The materializers then showed a wheezing Alexander and Carson Crevitch, who both had blistered cheeks.

“Ivy Sparrow!” Nix Wolf decided finally.

Ivy started. *She* was the winner?

The crowd roared with delight, whistling and stamping their feet. There were a few loud boos, but Ivy was too overwhelmed to be bothered by them.

She’d won; she’d actually *won.*

Her skin tingled with shock. She caught Alexander’s eye as he and Carson Crevitch were led away by medical staff. He smiled at her weakly, obviously relieved that it was all over. Nobody had approached the Jar of Shadows yet; in all the chaos, it seemed to have escaped everyone’s notice.

Ivy stepped carefully out of the chalk circle, still feeling wobbly, and began edging her way around the table toward the jar. She’d forgotten that Seb was behind her until he hugged her tightly. “Well done,” he said, his voice breaking.

With what strength Ivy had left, she shook him off. “Seb—the jar.” She swatted away a cloud of floating snow-globe cameras as they zoomed closer. “People will see it—we have to get it out of here.” She looked over to where Selena Grimes had been sitting. Her chair was empty.

Seb stepped inside the chalk circle and ran over to the jar. He bent down and put his arms around it. “It’s too heavy!”

“Don’t try to lift it,” Ivy cried. “If you drop it, you’ll release what’s inside.” As she searched for a solution, she heard another roar from the spectators. She turned and saw that they were rushing onto the floor.

Sprinting at the front of the pack was Valian, carrying Seb’s rucksack over one shoulder, with Ivy’s satchel slung across the other.

He surveyed the scene, and then, without a word of explanation, dragged Ivy back inside the chalk circle and spun the Grivens board.

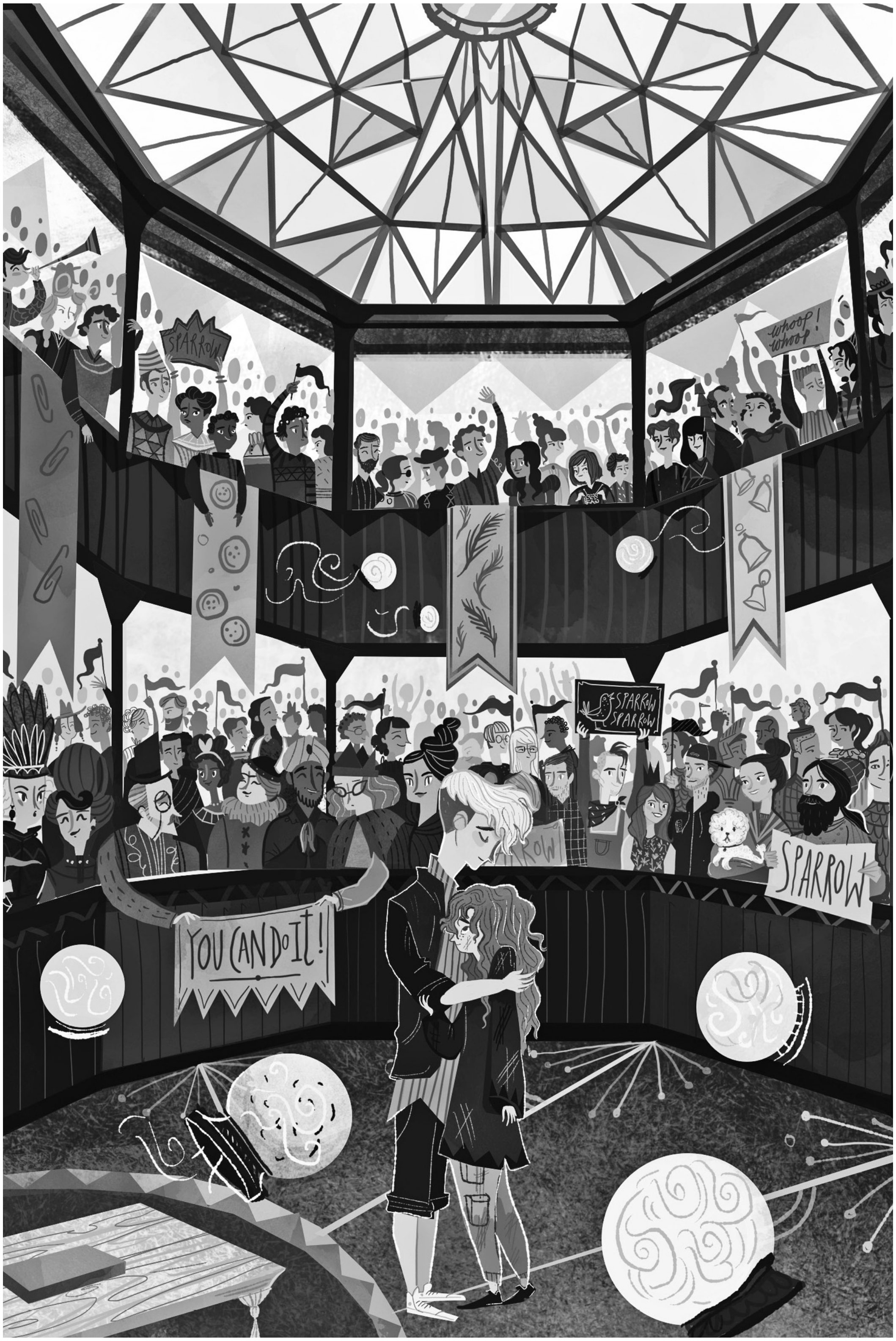
The stadium vanished. Ivy gasped as a canopy of dark leaves appeared above her head and the crumbling ochre ruins of some ancient temple rose from the earth around her. The light faded and the air was filled with a hundred birdcalls and the smell of the jungle.

Valian ran over the forest floor to where Seb was struggling with the jar. “We’ve only got minutes before someone in the stadium connects a snow globe to the Krigvelt and can see us again,” he said, tugging the Sack of Stars out of his jacket.

“Where are we going to send it?” Seb asked.

“I know,” Ivy said, hurrying over and whispering something into the lining. “I’ll explain when we get there.”

As she lowered her head into the sack, the jungle disappeared behind her.


SPARROW
Whoop! Whoop!
SPARROW SPARROW
ROW
SPARROW
YOU CAN DO IT!

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"Come on, come on." Ivy stared at the dark opening of the Sack of Stars, willing Seb and the Jar of Shadows to come out in one piece. "What's taking him so long?"

Valian fiddled with his gloves. "I don't know."

Ivy's pulse was racing, but her body felt numb and heavy, as if the Grivens contest had sapped all her energy. She took a great lungful of air, trying to stay calm.

It was quiet in her dad's office. The lights were off but moonlight crept in through the large bay window that looked out onto the street.

There was a scratchy rustle and the Jar of Shadows rolled out of the Sack of Stars onto the soft carpet. Ivy watched curiously as it enlarged from bag size to normal size….It gave her an idea.

Seb sighed. "That was the most nerve-racking bag journey of my life. We so didn't think it through. The jar could have smashed at any point."

"But it didn't," Valian said, giving him a hand up. Between the three of them they managed to right the jar.

Seb took a feather out of his rucksack. "I'm gonna send a message to Judy—let her and the others know we're OK."

"All right, but…" Valian scanned the piles of books, cardboard boxes and dusty microscopes in the room. "What are we doing here?"

"I thought of a way to protect the jar," Ivy said. "It might be crazy, but I was thinking we could hide it in the museum."

“Here?” Valian exclaimed. “But—the Dirge could easily breach the security in this building. It wouldn’t be safe.”

“But they’ll never know it’s here,” Ivy argued. “There are hundreds of jars just like it in the museum’s collection—I’ve seen them.” She turned to Seb. “Do you still have the tape measure that Granma Sylvie gave you?”

Seb stuffed a hand in his rucksack and rummaged around. “I think so, yeah….”

Ivy thought of the jar traveling in the Sack of Stars. “What if we shrink the jar so that it can’t be recognized?”

Valian rubbed his chin. “Go on…”

She went over to a large cardboard box that was sitting open on a desk. “Objects are added to the museum’s collection all the time,” she explained. “One of the things our dad does is date and classify everything before it’s put on display.” She peered inside. “All we need to do is stuff the small Jar of Shadows in some bubble wrap and put it in here. Dad will assume it’s been sent with all these other artifacts.”

She turned and examined the porcelain jar properly for the first time, running her fingers around the top. It didn’t have a lid. It was like a money box—the only way to open it would be to smash it. “It’ll be taken care of in here,” Ivy said. “They’ll think it’s priceless.”

“Technically it is,” Seb pointed out. “If Dad tries to date it, he’ll realize it’s thousands of years old. You know what—this is just crazy enough that it might actually work.”

Valian looked from one of them to the other and nodded. “All right, let’s do it.”

Ivy stood guard by the door while Seb and Valian resized the jar using the uncommon tape measure. It was quiet in the corridor that led into the museum when Ivy heard a scraping sound growing louder. She tensed as a shadow appeared behind the glass, and she stumbled back as the door opened….

“I came as soon as I got your message,” Judy said, skating inside. She stopped to catch her breath. “I hadn’t even left the Grivens stadium.” She caught sight of Seb, wrapping the miniature Jar of Shadows in bubble wrap. “Are you all OK?”

"Just about," Ivy told her, smiling. "Thanks for coming."

A line appeared on Valian's forehead. "You came from the stadium? How did you travel here so quickly? You couldn't have used a bag."

"Er—no, obviously not." Judy shook her head but didn't volunteer an explanation.

"You must have snuck in really quietly too," Ivy remarked. "There are security guards everywhere."

Judy shrugged. "I guess I'm too fast on my skates. They didn't seem to notice me."

Ivy had heard the loud thrum of Judy's roller skates out in the corridor; the security guards would surely have heard them too. Something didn't make sense.

She ran through the different ways in which uncommoners got around and remembered being startled when Johnny Hands had arrived almost immediately after she'd called him using his business card.

But Judy couldn't be dead, surely….

Ivy relaxed her senses and allowed her whispering to spread out to the walls of the room. She could hear the Jar of Shadows and several uncommon objects mumbling incoherently, but there was another voice present in the air, something energetic and warm.

Ivy's jaw dropped. "You're one of the dead, aren't you? I can sense it with my whispering."

Judy went very still. "What?" She tucked a strand of shiny hair behind her ear, her eyes flicking to Seb.

"*That's* how you read Dead Man's Code," Valian said softly. "All the dead know how to read it."

Seb coughed. "Sorry—*dead*?" The expression on his face was disbelieving. "No, you…you can't be."

Judy examined her tutu, her voice wobbling. "I was going to tell you, but I thought you wouldn't trust me anymore."

Ivy's skin tingled with shock. She thought back to the times she'd been near Judy, trying to understand why she hadn't sensed that she was dead. There were broken souls everywhere in Lundinor; perhaps Judy's had got lost in the din.

Judy sniffed, trying to keep her emotions in check. "Look—the reason I came here was to warn you. At the end of the contest Selena was nowhere to be seen, and if the Dirge have been hunting for the Jar of Shadows this long, she's going to do everything she can to get it back."

"She can't follow us here—she doesn't know where we've escaped to," Valian pointed out.

"That's why I think she'll do something to bring you to her," Judy said. "Like use someone you love as bait, someone she can trace easily."

"Granma Sylvie," Ivy said, tensing. "Has she been in contact?"

Judy shook her head. "Ethel was trying to get a featherlight to her when I left the stadium. Your granma still has no idea that you were entered in the Grivens contest."

Seb stopped glaring at Judy to refocus. "She must still be at the mansion. We have to go and check on her."

Valian picked up the Sack of Stars. "There's no time to waste."

As he pulled the bag over his head, Seb scowled at Judy. "You can stay put. We don't want liars coming with us."

—

The lights were on in the hallway of the Wrench Mansion. The place held bad memories from Ivy's last visit—of escaping from Selena's grim-wolf and fighting a host of vile dead creatures in the basement. Her senses were still on edge after the Grivens contest, and the mansion was a dangerous place. She stuffed the Sack of Stars into her satchel and brought out her yo-yo.

With the weapon clutched in her hand, she took a few steps forward over the thick carpet. "Granma?" she called uncertainly. "It's Ivy and Seb!"

"And Valian," Seb added, slipping his drumsticks out of his inside pockets.

The house was full of cobwebs and shadows. Portraits of hard-eyed faces covered the walls—Ivy’s distant relatives.

She heard a rustle at the top of the grand staircase and began to climb. “Granma?”

There was a clatter, and then a door on the landing swung open. Silvery light came flooding out. Ivy almost tripped on the stairs. Seb and Valian stopped behind her.

“Ivy?” Granma Sylvie’s silhouette appeared in the doorway. Her voice was shaky.

The three of them hurried up the last few steps but approached Granma Sylvie with caution.

As the light fell across her face, Ivy realized that something serious had happened. Granma Sylvie’s eyes were red, as if she’d been crying. “What time is it?” she asked, rubbing her forehead. There was an unfamiliar edge to her voice.

“Before midnight,” Ivy answered. She wasn’t sure of the exact time; she only knew that the Grivens contest had started at eight. “Are you OK? Has something happened? You haven’t been in touch all day.”

Granma Sylvie sighed before two words slipped out of her mouth and everything changed.

“I remember.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In contrast to the rest of the gloomy Wrench Mansion, Granma Sylvie's teenage bedroom shone with the spirit of rebellion. Set into the roof beams —just like Ivy's own attic room—it had wallpaper of a shimmering sky blue, and linen curtains soft as clouds hung at the windows. Floating in the middle of the ceiling, an uncommon milk jug spilled pale light across every possible surface, illuminating the toys, books and odd knickknacks Granma Sylvie had collected during her childhood.

Ivy could see the moon outside despite the rain pattering against the glass. A London skyline spread out below; the mansion was temporarily residing in her home city.

"What happened?" she asked. She could see that Granma Sylvie had been rummaging through her things for a while—books and soft toys lay strewn across the floor, the wardrobe doors were open and there were clean patches in the dust on the shelves where things had been moved around. "Did it all come back to you at once?"

Granma Sylvie took a seat on the bed. "It was all to do with this room. I was so scared of setting foot in here, I'd persuaded the underguard to explore the mansion bottom-up; that way, I wouldn't have to face my bedroom—and all the secrets it might contain—till the very end."

Ivy came to sit next to her, placing her satchel on the floor.

"After the underguard left I eventually plucked up the courage to come in," Granma Sylvie told them. "I was surprised by how familiar everything was. Each time I picked up an object or opened a drawer, a memory returned. That’s why I’ve been here so long.” She laid a hand on her bed, stroking the dusty fabric. “I used to sit here and read with my mother, and we’d plan our Hobsmatch together in that mirror on the dressing table.”

“It’s like your own fears were preventing your memories from returning,” Seb said. “You had to overcome them.”

Granma Sylvie tucked a strand of hair behind Ivy’s ear and tensed when she saw that it was scorched. “What on earth’s happened to you? Are you all right?”

Ivy told her about the Grivens contest and Selena Grimes’s failed attempt to open the Jar of Shadows—excluding any mention of her and Seb’s involvement.

Granma Sylvie shook her head. “Selena Grimes and I were friends once. I knew what she did…what she became.” A look of regret crossed her face. “I was never involved in her schemes, or my father’s. My mother and I fought the Dirge in secret.”

“We all knew you weren’t one of the bad guys,” Seb said.

Ivy smiled. At least now Granma Sylvie knew it for certain.

Valian looked out of the window. “The reason we’re here is because we think that Selena might come after you.”

Granma Sylvie scowled and pulled Ivy’s satchel onto her lap. “Earlier I remembered about the postcard—Amos sent it. The photo on the front was taken when he and I first became friends.” As she searched for the postcard, she came across the leather-bound journal. “This was Amos’s most treasured possession.” Her face glowed, as if something had been ignited deep inside.

“What do you know about Amos?” Ivy asked hurriedly. For the first time ever, she could ask her granma about something uncommon-related. It felt fantastic.

“He was invited to join the Rasavatum when we were just kids,” Granma Sylvie told her, tapping the journal as the information flooded back to her. “He told me, because he knew I was fighting the Dirge too. During the last three years I spent in Lundinor I helped him to develop a tracer serum, which he was planning to use to track down several of the Great Uncommon Good. That's how he found the Jar of Shadows."

"*He* found the Jar of Shadows?" Valian said.

Granma Sylvie stroked the black leather cover of the journal. She frowned and then opened it up, flipping through the empty pages. She seemed to be counting, and after exactly forty-two pages she stopped.

"We need a liquid mixed with love," she muttered. "It's the only thing that activates the ink."

*Uncommon ink…*So that was what Ivy had been sensing all this time. She thought carefully. "Valian, do you still have that Raider's Tonic that Miss H and Miss W gave you?"

Valian reached into his inside pocket and brought out a small pewter flask. "Never leave my room without it."

Ivy unscrewed the cap and poured a few drops onto the pages of the journal.

As the liquid sank into the paper, she shuffled closer to see what was happening. There was a rustling sound, and an odorless gray smoke rose from the spine of the notebook. Granma Sylvie closed it gently and laid it on her lap as the smoke continued to seep out.

Ivy's mind began to whir. *The smoke…The black cover…*

She shuddered. "No way! Granma, *that's* what you were seeing in your memory! It was never a black door with a smoking hourglass on it. It was *this journal*."

"That's right," Granma Sylvie said, sounding unsurprised. "My memories of what Amos was working on in his journal were trying to return; I just misinterpreted them."

When the gray smoke had stopped leaking out of the journal, Granma Sylvie opened it up again and fanned through. Neat black handwriting filled every page, along with sketches, diagrams and complex algebra—in a range of languages, from hieroglyphics to Chinese.

Ivy couldn't believe it had been hidden there all along. "What does it say?"

Granma Sylvie flicked to a point three-quarters of the way through the book, where the writing finished and the pages were blank. “Amos chronicled his hunt for the Great Uncommon Good, along with everything he’d learned about the Dirge’s plans—including things about Selena. All his most important discoveries are in these pages. He protected his secrets by submerging the paper in a special uncommon solution he’d mixed. It meant that the words would only appear if a liquid mixed with love touched the paper. He believed it would prevent anyone with a cold heart from reading it.”

Ivy wondered how Jack-in-the-Green had managed it; perhaps he’d used the help of someone else. She thought of Selena’s desperate visit to the Dirge back in 1967. “Do you know what happened to Selena?”

Granma Sylvie’s face was grave. “Yes, but perhaps Amos can explain it better than me.” She flicked through and pointed to the top of a page dated October 20, 1967.

Two months before Selena died. Ivy began to read aloud so that Seb and Valian could hear:

“I am being followed. A quick-footed gentleman, possibly dead. Using a tracing serum (batch 2, formula 7.3), I tracked him to a cellar door on Lightning Bolt Lane, where he disappeared. I suspect he is working for the Dirge.

“Selena has noticed me looking over my shoulder. I’m wary of telling her the truth about my investigations into the Great Uncommon Good. I know she loves me, but it is too dangerous to let her share my secrets. I cannot put her at risk too—”

“Wait. Amos and Selena were in love?” Ivy said.

“They were engaged to be married,” Granma Sylvie explained, “but Amos was afraid to announce it publicly in case the Dirge used Selena to get to him. She wasn’t Wolfsbane back then. That postcard you found—she and I were friends at that time, but we grew apart as we got older.” She nodded back to the journal, encouraging Ivy to read on.

“The twenty-fifth of October 1967

“A crooked sixpence was found at the scene of another murder today. The streets are empty; people are too scared to trade. With every innocent

life that is lost, I become more determined to destroy the Dirge and their evil.

"Tonight I plan to go through the cellar door on Lightning Bolt Lane. Maybe my follower knows a thing or two…."

The writing finished there. Ivy turned the page. "Wait—that's it?"

"That was the night Amos died," Granma Sylvie said quietly with a frown. "He was murdered on the other side of that cellar door, no doubt. His body was found the next morning in the street outside."

Ivy shivered and laid a hand on Granma Sylvie's arm. "He was your friend; I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "He became a ghoul for a few years before he Departed. I had some good times with him, but the experience had changed him. He was never the same."

Ivy flicked through a few blank pages before the entries appeared again, only this time with subtle differences. The ink was now a pale, ghostly shade of blue and the handwriting was wobbly. Amos must have used the rest of the book to chart what happened to him after he died.

"Selena came to me, devastated, after Amos was killed," Granma Sylvie explained. "Her grief was so overwhelming she decided she could no longer bear it; she wanted to become a ghoul too, so that she could be with Amos forever."

"*That's* why she sought out the Dirge in 1967," Ivy said. "She wanted them to turn her into a ghoul. *That* was why she died that night—*they* killed her and she asked them to!"

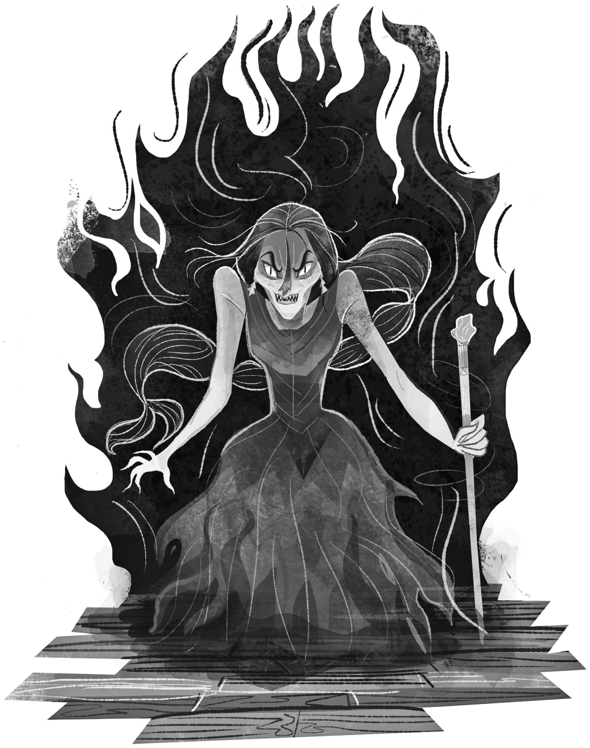
Granma Sylvie bobbed her head. "Except that her plan failed, of course. The Dirge successfully turned her into a ghoul, but when she met Amos again, he was so disgusted that she'd made a bargain with the Dirge—the very people he'd spent his life fighting—that he told her he never wanted to see her again." She sighed. "I tried to reason with Selena afterward, but she was too heartbroken to listen. Consumed by grief and at her weakest, she sought sanctuary with the Dirge…." She hesitated. "After that, I can only guess what happened. The previous Wolfsbane must have Departed—and then Selena was invited to take their place. The Selena I had known was gone. Selena today may have the same face as the girl I knew, but she is infinitely more cruel and dangerous."

A clatter sounded downstairs. Ivy felt the floorboards creak. "What's that? Is there anyone else here?"

Granma Sylvie stiffened. "There shouldn't be."

Using her whispering, Ivy searched past the walls of the bedroom and out into the mansion. One of the dead was approaching from below.

Before she could shout out a warning, a figure rose *through* the floor. A long dark braid, pale skin and thin red lips: *Selena Grimes*. Her stone-gray dress shifted around her body like a shadow and her face was frozen in an expression of disgust. She glowered at Ivy and Granma Sylvie, brandishing an ebony walking cane in her hand.



It sliced through the air like a scythe. "*That* journal belongs to me!" She lunged toward them, cane aloft. *Crack!* Several thorny creepers shot from the end of it, flying straight for Ivy's face.

She ducked out of the way just in time. The brambles ripped into Granma Sylvie's bed, tearing open the pillows.

Selena laughed. “You cannot hope to escape this time. I’m going to kill you all, as I should have done a long time ago.” She whirled the uncommon cane above her head and a forest of thorns ripped through the floorboards, shredding anything in their path. “Give me that!” she screeched, lunging for the journal in Granma Sylvie’s hands. “How *dare* you touch it!”

Granma Sylvie spun away, causing Selena to trip over a pile of books and end up on her hands and knees, hovering eerily above the floor. Smacking his drumsticks at Granma Sylvie’s old wardrobe, Seb sent it toppling over onto Selena with a loud *bang.*

“You three, get to the stairs,” Granma Sylvie ordered, grabbing Ivy’s satchel and tugging out the Sack of Stars. “There’s a car in the drive; I’ll meet you there. Go—now!”

Her voice spurred Ivy into action and she ran over to the door. Selena was stirring, her body appearing through the wardrobe. Ivy dodged several leaping brambles before escaping onto the landing, Seb and Valian right behind her.

“What about Granma?” Seb called, looking back into the bedroom. Granma Sylvie was by the window, tossing Amos’s notebook into the Sack of Stars.

“It sounds like she has a plan. Do what she says,” Valian urged. “Selena’s trying to kill us. More of the Dirge could be on their way. We need to run—*now.*”

Ivy tore down the stairs ahead of Seb and Valian, shooting through the front door and out into the night. The house was surrounded by a neat lawn and a trimmed box hedge; a vintage Volkswagen Beetle was parked in the drive. Ivy heard a scratchy thud on the lawn and saw Granma Sylvie touching down, lowering an uncommon belt to her waist. Ivy had used one before—they enabled you to fly.

“Kept one in my room for emergencies,” Granma Sylvie called, shaking out the belt. “Get in the car! I’ve trapped Selena with an uncommon paper clip, but she’ll break free at any moment.”

The doors were unlocked. Seb took the front passenger seat while Valian and Ivy squeezed into the back. Ivy was all fingers and thumbs as she struggled to get her seat belt on. It was strange being in a common mode of transport again. Granma Sylvie got the engine running and pulled away.

“Where are we going?” Seb asked, still panting.

Ivy looked through the rear window as vines burst through the first-floor windows of the mansion and spread out across the front garden. Selena was nowhere to be seen.

“To the gardens,” Granma Sylvie said. “We have to get back to Lundinor and find Ethel and the others. If Selena’s risking using that cane on common land, it can mean only one thing.”

“What?” Ivy asked, impressed by how much Granma Sylvie now understood.

“The underguard must be busy dealing with something else,” she said. “Something very bad.”

There was no underguard from Special Branch in the potting shed to escort them down the uncommon hose, so the four of them helped themselves to a garden sack each and took turns clambering inside. “Why couldn’t we use the Sack of Stars to get there?” Ivy asked before pushing off.

“I’ve sent something else through it,” Granma Sylvie said. “You can’t use bags for two different journeys at the same time.”

As Ivy twisted around and around the helter skelter into the main arrivals chamber, a scent began to fill her nostrils—charcoal and sulfur, like the smell of fireworks. By the time she touched down at the bottom and stood up, she was coughing.

On the opposite side of the chamber the Great Gates stood open, but their intricate design featuring orange and lemon trees had been altered to show something else:

The smoking hourglass.

CHAPTER THIRTY

"Stay close to me," Granma Sylvie said, leading the way through the Great Gates onto the Gauntlet. "Selena can't be far behind."

Ivy scanned the area. "Where *is* everyone?" The wide gravel road was deserted, and the only sound came from the wind rustling through the empty fields on either side. The thatched cottages had their blinds drawn and windows shut. Ivy knew it was late, but she had expected the place to be teeming with supporters leaving the Grivens contest.

Valian cast wary glances up and down the street. "I've never seen Lundinor like this."

They continued along the Gauntlet, searching for clues.

"Over there." Seb pointed to a blackened spot by the roadside: a small muddy hole surrounded by a ring of singed grass.

"What is it?" Ivy asked.

Valian bent down to inspect it. "A drain hole. Lundinor might seem different every season, but the core structure—the air filters, the sewage system, the road layout—is always the same. The drain network runs through all four quarters."

"They've overflowed." Granma Sylvie took out a pen, poked it into the sludge and held it under her nose. Ivy grimaced.

"This isn't drain water," Granma Sylvie said. "There's something uncommon going on here. You smell…"

Ivy screwed up her face, giving the pen a sniff. The mud smelled smoky and sweet, just like…“Dragon’s Breath Ale,” Ivy exclaimed.

“*Ale?* Interesting.” Granma Sylvie wiped her pen on the grass and straightened up. “We’d better keep walking.”

More scorched drains appeared as they continued. As the House of Bells came into sight, Granma Sylvie gasped. The thatched roof was smoking and half the wooden porch had collapsed, blocking the door. Chunks of splintered masonry lay scattered across the street. “Ethel!” she cried, hurrying closer. “Ethel, are you in there?”

Ivy shot Seb and Valian a look of concern as they followed her.

There was silence at first, and then a muffled voice called out, *“Sylvie?”* Ethel appeared at a broken downstairs window, her face sweating and pale behind the jagged pieces of glass. “What are you doing out there? Get inside; they’ll smell you.”

“*Smell* us?” Seb repeated. “What are you talking about?”

Before Ethel could answer, Granma Sylvie turned and stared into the distance, going very still. Ivy followed her gaze. Smoke was rising over a far-off hill, forming into a huge cloud that loomed under the cave ceiling.

“Ivy,” Granma Sylvie said in a tight voice. “That cloud—what does your whispering tell you about it?”

Ivy concentrated hard, focusing on the distant patch of smoke. There were lots of broken souls there, with angry voices talking at the same time. “It’s made of dead creatures,” she said. “I think they’re coming toward us.” Suddenly she caught a sound on the air—a rumbling, crackling noise like a giant bonfire.

“Pyroaches,” Granma Sylvie growled. “They shouldn’t be here; there isn’t any fire.”

Ivy recalled Mr. Littlefair’s chilling warning about the creatures during the fire at Brewster’s Alehouse. “Dragon’s Breath Ale allows people to temporarily breathe fire. Could the flooded drains have something to do with it?”

Valian scuffed his foot on the blackened grass. “If the ale is in the sewers, any number of pyroaches could have drunk it. It would allow them to create fire themselves—to move around freely.”

In the distance the dark swarm was getting bigger. Granma Sylvie's face was white with horror. "They'll be here in minutes. We need to get inside *now*!"

"Over here," Seb called, scrambling across the porch and lifting aside a plank of wood. "There's a hole in the wall we can fit through."

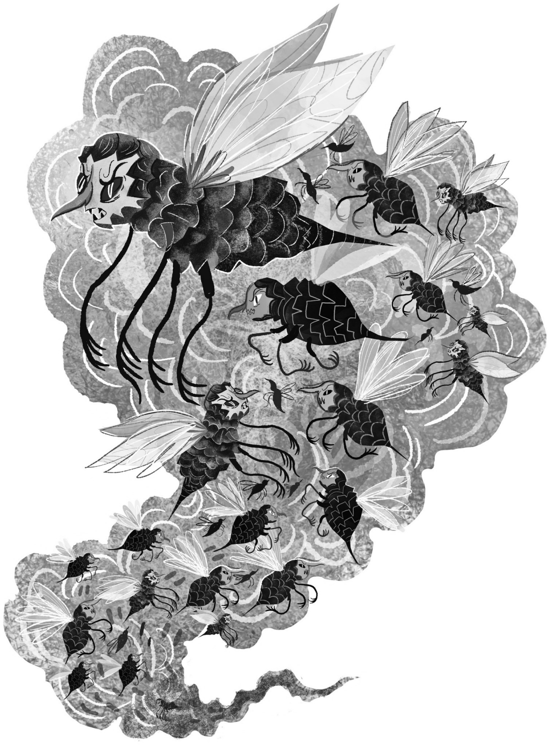
Ivy could hear the crackling noise getting louder. "Hurry—I think I can see them." A gigantic ball of fire turned onto the Gauntlet. Inside the flames was a mass of long dark bodies flying in warplane formation. Thatched cottages on either side burst alight as they passed.

Without a second to spare, Ivy, Seb, Valian and Granma Sylvie scrambled through the splintered hole into the House of Bells. Seb speedily covered it up with wood from the other side.

The cottage walls trembled.

"Get down!" Ethel whispered, kneeling on the floor.

They all crawled toward a window and peered over the ledge. The timbers rattled as the swarm of pyroaches shot past. With every glimpse, Ivy was able to build a more complete picture of the creatures, and it made her skin crawl. Each pyroach was the size of a small dog, with long wings the color of molten lava and a body that scraped and crunched as it flew. Its head was disturbingly human, but four black legs hung from the segment between its neck and chest.



Ivy tucked herself down under the window frame; she was shaking. The pyroaches' wings thudded through the air, making the walls of the House of Bells rattle.

After a minute or so the crackling noises began to fade.

"The pyroaches were waiting outside the Grivens stadium," Ethel said. "I managed to escape on a mop, but most of the audience fled to Mr. Punch's big top. Violet sent me featherlights to explain what was going on. Mr. Punch 'as protected everyone in the tent, but 'ow long 'e can hold out, I don't know. No one 'as any weapons to defend themselves."

Ivy thought of Judy—she must have left the stadium before anyone had discovered the pyroaches waiting outside. "Perhaps the sewers were flooded with Dragon's Breath Ale while the contest was going on."

Ethel blinked. "*Ale?* No one at the big top knows anything about that."

"Where's the underguard?" Valian asked as Ethel headed for the door at the back of the shop.

“A second swarm of pyroaches are besieging the station,” she replied over her shoulder. “A few officers may ’ave escaped using body bags, but if they’ve tried to reenter Lundinor through the Great Gates, they’ll ’ave just been driven inside.”

The others followed Ethel into the storeroom.

“We’ve got to rescue them,” Ivy said, curling her hands into fists. “We could evacuate people using the Sack of Stars.”

Granma Sylvie reached into her handbag and pulled it out. Ethel cast the burlap sack a startled look.

“We can’t,” Valian said. “You remember what Mr. Punch told us: it’s our responsibility to keep the bag hidden, no matter what. If the Dirge found it—”

“Evacuation wouldn’t work anyway,” Granma Sylvie cut in. “The pyroaches would overwhelm Mr. Punch before everyone was able to escape. It’s him we need to help, only we’ll need some more equipment.” She patted Ethel’s shoulder. “We can’t fight pyroaches without putting out fires.”

Ethel frowned at Granma Sylvie’s hand. “You sound strangely sure of that, Sylv….’Ave you remembered something?”

Granma Sylvie’s lips twitched into a smile. “It’s *all* come back, old friend,” she said, tapping her temple. “Everything.”

Ethel started. “*What?*” She took a few steps closer. “Are you certain?”

Granma Sylvie exhaled. “Oh, will you just come here?” She threw her arms around Ethel, squeezing tightly.

The shrill grate of pyroach wings suddenly made the shop walls tremble. Ethel’s face fell. “Better catch up later.”

Granma Sylvie turned to Ivy, Seb and Valian. “You three go through the bag first. As soon as you reach the big top, go and find Mr. Littlefair and Violet, and *stay* with them until this is over. Ethel and I will see what we can do to aid Mr. Punch.”

While Granma Sylvie went to help Ethel find an uncommon watering can, Valian lowered his voice. “Keep a lookout for Selena. The pyroaches won’t bother her—they only feed on living flesh.”

Ivy took her yo-yo out of her satchel and stuffed it in her trouser pocket, ready to use. She listened in as Granma Sylvie and Ethel discussed their plans.

"Pyroaches can smell you and see you, but they 'ave poor hearing," Ethel was saying.

Granma Sylvie tucked a plastic spade—just like the ones the castleguards had used to fight the fire at the alehouse—into her belt. "Agreed. Staying quiet and hidden is our best line of defense."

Ivy took note of their advice. With Selena on their tail, she didn't know when it might come in handy.

Granma Sylvie fixed her long hair into a ponytail and smoothed down her blouse. "Ready?" She laid the Sack of Stars on the floor in front of them. "Good luck, everyone."

—

The air in the big top was humid and filled with panicked conversation. As Ivy got to her feet, she searched for Mr. Littlefair and Violet. The majority of the uncommoners sat huddled in the center of the sandy floor; some were busy constructing a barricade at the entrance using the heaviest of Mr. Punch's chests. Pyroaches still circled the tent, the roar making Ivy shudder.

As she scanned the injured, her spirits fell. Casualties ranged from singed hair and minor burns to serious wounds. Young children were sobbing, hiding in the folds of their parents' Hobsmatch.

Ivy had never seen the traders of Lundinor look so vulnerable and helpless before. Her throat tightened as she glimpsed each anxious face. They were trapped, not only in the tent but in Lundinor itself—a gigantic cave now plagued by flesh-eating monsters.

At the edge of the tent she spotted Alexander Brewster, his face scratched and bleeding. Violet and Mr. Littlefair stood close by in a group of other Gauntlet traders.

"There they are," Seb said. The Sack of Stars rustled on the floor behind them as Ethel scrambled out. "Let's go."

They made their way across the tent toward Alexander.

“Ivy?” His eyes were watery. “My pa is outside—trapped in a building on the opposite side of the green. He’s got nothing to defend himself with.”

Seb winced. “Isn’t there someone out there who can help?”

“Everyone’s hiding.” Alexander’s voice sounded resigned. “Here—I’ll show you.”

They wove their way through to a small section of tent wall that was dotted with golf-ball-sized holes. “They’re big enough to see through but too small to let a pyroach in,” Alexander explained briefly.

Ivy pushed her face against the purple canvas and peeked through the gap.

Outside, the place looked like a deserted movie set. The dark streets were empty and the only flicker of movement came from an orange light that flashed across the ground as the pyroaches patrolled overhead.

“Mr. Punch is outside the main entrance,” Alexander said. “My pa is on the right, in the hotel with the stained-glass windows. We’ve been staying there while the alehouse is being repaired.” He paused. “He didn’t want to watch me in the Grivens contest; I think he’s still angry about the fire and that business with the photo frame.”

Ivy spied Mr. Punch in his red and black ringmaster’s coat, standing alone on the grass. In his hand was a closed black umbrella, dripping with water. Above his curly orange beard, his face was stiff. A cloud of pyroaches plunged toward him, but Mr. Punch merely pointed his umbrella at them and opened it up. A barrage of icicles and raindrops shot out, slicing through the air and spearing pyroaches. The water droplets doused their fire and, weakened, they disappeared down the nearest drain.

Drummond Brewster was more difficult to spot, but Ivy eventually glimpsed his red face and barrel chest in the window of a three-story cottage across the green.

“There must be some way to get to him,” she said, drawing back. “Maybe we can distract the pyroaches….”

As Alexander peered through the hole again, Seb lowered his voice. “Ivy, there are too many of them, and we’re their *food*.”

“Yes, but pyroaches have bad hearing,” she argued. “Perhaps if we’re quiet, we can sneak over without being noticed.”

Valian chewed the suggestion over. “We’d have a better chance if we split up. Seb and I could create a diversion while you and Alexander fetch his dad.”

After sharing their makeshift plan with Alexander, they found a spot behind a wall of cabinets where no one could see them, and Seb used his drumsticks to blast a hole in the soil under the tent. “I’ll fill it in once we’ve crawled through,” he said. “We don’t want the pyroaches getting in.”

Outside, the roar of the pyroach swarm was ferocious. The four of them dashed over the scorched grass and ducked down behind a smoking tree stump, staying as quiet as they could.

“The pyroaches are just rounding the tent,” Valian said, pointing. “Seb and I will try to lure them down there, away from the big top. That should give you enough time to reach your dad.”

Alexander nodded. Seb’s knuckles were white as he clutched his drumsticks. “Wait here till you’re sure the pyroaches have seen us, Ivy. You don’t want to set off too soon.”

Ivy hugged him. “Be careful.” She watched as he and Valian raced out from behind the tree stump, sprinting toward a half-melted line of sky stop lockers.

Ivy turned her attention back to the big top, trying not to think about the danger Valian and Seb were putting themselves in. She tensed when she saw Mr. Punch. His face was weary and his appearance flicked between the red-haired ringmaster and the crooked-toothed old man.

Other uncommoners wouldn’t be able to see the changes, but she understood exactly what it meant: he was getting weaker. If Mr. Punch’s umbrella was anything like Ivy’s yo-yo or Seb’s drumsticks, you needed energy and focus to operate it, and Mr. Punch’s were rapidly draining away. She didn’t know how long he’d be able to keep it up.

“Mr. Punch’s strength is faltering,” she told Alexander. She thought of the families trapped inside the big top. “We have to help him.”

Alexander blinked. “What about my pa?”

“We’ll rescue him afterward,” Ivy promised, “but there are too many lives at risk in that tent. Mr. Punch needs us.”

“No!” Alexander grabbed her arm. “We have to save my pa now. The pyroaches will soon run out of ale and get desperate.”

Ivy was about to suggest they split up, when something tugged at the back of her memory: Ethel had mentioned that no one inside the big top knew about the Dragon’s Breath Ale. “How do you know about the ale?” she asked.

Alexander’s face twitched. “It doesn’t matter. We need to focus on my pa.”

Ivy shook his hand off, overcome by an unsettling thought. “Alexander…did you have something to do with this?”

His voice was bitter. “It wasn’t meant to happen this way. The vats were set to flood the sewers while I was in the stadium. I thought my pa would be in the East End, not here.”

Ivy swayed on her feet as she absorbed his complete lack of guilt. “*You* released the pyroaches?”

“My plans have never gone wrong before!” he said defensively. “I make sure I take into account every eventuality—it’s what mixologists do. My pa was never in danger on the other occasions.”

The other occasions…?

Ivy went cold as she realized what he meant.

“The smoking hourglass—it was *you*, wasn’t it? *You* started the fire at the alehouse. *You* killed those underguards at the memorial!” She couldn’t believe he had fooled her into feeling sorry for him. “*Why?*” she cried. “Why would you do that?”

Alexander squeezed his hands into fists. “I only did what I had to do to prove myself worthy! Being invited into the Rasavatum is the greatest accolade a mixologist can receive. I had to prove I was good enough.”

The Rasavatum…That was why Alexander had used the smoking hourglass—to attract their attention and win their favor.

“I did it for my pa,” he continued, gritting his teeth. “It’s the only way he’ll ever notice me.” For a moment Ivy felt sorry for him, but then he added, “If people have to die, then so what? You have to make sacrifices to become great. I thought Mr. Punch would know that and invite me in.” He scowled. “I guess he isn’t the man I thought he was.”

Ivy stiffened, wondering how Alexander had discovered that Mr. Punch was in the Rasavatum. “Alexander, listen to me,” she pleaded. “You can stop this before it gets any worse.” She checked on Mr. Punch, who was still floundering. “Help me fight the pyroaches.”

“*Fight* them?” Alexander jerked his head. “Why would I want to fight them?” He took something out of his apron—a small plastic wand, the kind you used to blow bubbles—and stepped out from behind the tree stump.

Ivy shot to her feet. “No—wait!” She spied the glow of the pyroach swarm as it skirted the big top, heading toward them.

But she needn’t have worried. Alexander ran toward the flaming mass holding the bubble wand to his mouth. As the creatures dived toward him, he formed a tiny O with his lips and puffed out his cheeks, blowing.

A blast of fire shot from the wand, directing the pyroaches away from him. Ivy remained frozen with shock as Alexander leaped onto a smoking tree stump at the mouth of the Gauntlet, opposite Mr. Punch. He had a confident look that Ivy had never seen before.

“What do you think of my show?” he asked, arms outstretched. “Is it not good enough for the Rasavatum?”

Ivy couldn’t believe it—the gentle, meek boy she had first met…it had all been a façade. *This* was the real Alexander.

Mr. Punch looked horror-struck. “You have got it *all* wrong, Alexander,” he cried. “The Rasavatum brew remedies that rebuild lives; they don’t destroy them like this. You must stop this madness!”

“Madness?” Alexander snorted. “Do you know how many pyroaches there are, surviving in the fiery places on Earth? Hundreds of thousands! More than there are uncommoners in this whole stinking undermart; and they are free now because of ME! And the Rasavatum think that is madness?”

“Alexander, *listen*!” Mr. Punch boomed, his patience clearly at an end. “The Rasavatum will never accept you. It’s *over*!”

Alexander snarled in fury. He raised the bubble wand to his mouth, and this time an orb of fire the size of a double-decker bus emerged and shot toward the big top.

“No!” Ivy shouted, running out into the open. If that fireball hit, it would burn a hole right through the big top, letting the pyroaches in.

His expression grim, Mr. Punch took hold of his umbrella in both hands and swung it toward the fire like a tennis racket. “Gah!” he cried, his face straining. The gigantic fireball was repelled in a flash of steam. It jetted off toward the cave ceiling, where it soon fizzled away.

As Mr. Punch dropped to his knees, the pyroaches came thundering into sight over his shoulder. Ivy gripped her trusty yo-yo, wondering if she could use it to somehow trap them.

“Hey, bug-brains!” Valian shouted. “Over here!”

Ivy turned to see him and Seb zooming about on uncommon mops, trying to lure the pyroaches toward the other side of the green. Ivy assumed they’d scavenged the mops from the damaged sky stop. She couldn’t believe Seb had found the courage to ride one on his own.

“Tasty human flesh snack!” he yelled. “Ready to eat!”

The pyroaches clocked them instantly, and the whole horde turned.

Ivy sprinted forward, reaching out with her whispering as she headed for Valian and her brother. She could sense the pyroaches approaching fast. “Seb!” she shouted. He did an about-face and caught her eye. “I’m going to try and trap them. Use your drumsticks to keep them contained.”

Seb saw her yo-yo and nodded, steering his mop down toward the ground, while Valian remained in the air.

Ivy threw her hand down, charging her yo-yo with power. After a few revolutions she shot it over her shoulder, using her whispering to help find her target. A huge tornado exploded out of it, advancing on the pyroach swarm.

“Stop it!” Alexander shouted. “You’re ruining everything!” He jumped off his tree stump and marched in Ivy’s direction, bringing his bubble wand to his lips. Behind him, Ivy caught sight of Mr. Punch struggling to his knees.

Alexander took aim at Seb and Valian and blew a stream of orange fire toward them. Valian sent his mop into a nosedive, dodging clear of the flames, but on the ground Seb wasn't fast enough to outrun them.

Ivy screamed. "Seb!"

The fire was seconds away from engulfing him when a dark-haired figure wearing a pale pink tutu materialized out of thin air at Seb's back.

Judy…?

She threw herself over Seb as if she was a fire-retardant blanket, forcing him to the ground. The flames coursed around them and then dissipated a hundred yards away, crackling in the grass.

Ivy ran toward them as Valian landed on his mop. A huge black scorch mark surrounded Judy's body. Slowly she peeled herself away from Seb. Ivy's eyes watered with relief to see her brother stirring. Judy's tutu had been burned to shreds and her roller skates were smoking.

There was no time for conversation. As Ivy skidded to a halt beside Valian, she sensed the pyroaches approaching and turned just as they collided with her tornado. The impact sent shockwaves through the air. Ivy was driven back across the grass so hard that she left marks in the mud.

The tornado whirled faster, dragging every pyroach inside it. It spun so rapidly that the creatures lost control and hurtled through the flames, crashing into one another.

Seb stumbled dazedly to his feet. He caught sight of Judy and then the tornado, and managed to slide his drumsticks free. Steadying himself, he aimed a few beats at the maelstrom, pushing back any pyroach that managed to gather enough momentum to pull free.

With the creatures temporarily contained, a flurry of people started dashing between buildings, trying to find better shelter. Ivy noticed a shiny-faced Drummond Brewster leave his hiding place and run out onto the green toward Alexander.

However, Alexander's attention was elsewhere. Glaring at Ivy, his face flushed with rage and he lifted his bubble wand to his lips.

Ivy floundered around, looking for an escape. She couldn't outrun a fireball.

As Alexander forced air through the wand, Mr. Punch charged him from behind. Too late, a flaming sphere the size of a small truck erupted from the wand and headed not in Ivy's direction but toward *Drummond Brewster.*

Alexander jumped up and down, waving madly. "No! Pa! Run!"

But there was nothing Drummond Brewster could do.

Ivy looked away as the flames hit. When she turned back, Alexander was running toward a blackened heap on the scorched grass.

A small group of people spilled out of the big top. Ethel hurried toward Mr. Punch, while Granma Sylvie came running up to Ivy and the others.

"The cyclone is dying," she cried, waving her hands. "Get back inside the tent, all of you. The pyroaches won't be contained for much longer!"

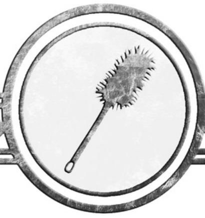
Ivy glimpsed the Sack of Stars in her hand and had an idea. "Granma, the bag—we can send the pyroaches through it."

Granma Sylvie's eyes gleamed. She hesitated for a moment, then brought the bag to her lips and whispered something into the opening. She sprinted toward the pyroaches, lifting an arm above her head, and flung the bag into the center of the flames.

With a great roar, the tornado imploded, gathering in on itself like a dying star. All the pyroaches were dragged inside the bag—but, as they disappeared, the burlap caught fire and was reduced to cinders.

Ivy sucked in a deep breath as the shock tingled through her.

The Sack of Stars was gone.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Granma Sylvie trod on the patch of soot where the bag had once been. “Well, that’s ruined one of Amos’s theories. The Great Uncommon Good *can* be destroyed, obviously.” She sighed and pulled Ivy and Seb toward her in a hug. “Are you two OK?”

“Some of the other traders ’ave gone to free the underguards,” Ethel said, approaching them.

Ivy saw a stream of uncommoners cautiously leaving the tent, still clutching one another tightly and glancing around.

Ethel ruffled a hand through Ivy’s hair. “Well done, kid. That move with the yo-yo really got those beasts disorientated. Shame about the bag.”

Ivy couldn’t believe it. One of the Great Uncommon Good—gone forever. There were only four left now.

From over by the big top they heard a cry. Alexander was being wrestled away from Mr. Punch. His uncommon bubble wand had been taken off him.

“I’m sorry about your father, Alexander,” Mr. Punch said sincerely. As he bowed his head, Ivy noticed that he was switching between the red-bearded ringmaster and the bespectacled, gray-haired shop assistant.

“Get off me!” Alexander roared, struggling to break free. “This is all your fault!” Then he pointed to Ivy and Seb. “And yours. You did this. *All* of you. You killed my pa!”

There was so much pain in his voice. After everything he’d done, Ivy still felt sorry for him.

Valian and Judy came running across the grass. The crowd emerging from the big top fell silent. Ivy noticed it parting, and into the gap strode…

“Selena.” A chill went down Ivy’s spine.

“Stay close,” Granma Sylvie said. “This isn’t over yet.”

“Traders of Lundinor!” Selena called, her voice as majestic as always. “I’m afraid I have some troubling news.” She turned in a circle, catching the gaze of every trader. Her gray dress rippled like water. “This boy is not the true criminal among us, nor the true mastermind behind the pyroach attack.” She swept toward Alexander and laid a hand on his shoulder. The burly gentleman who had been restraining him simply let go.

Alexander looked as if he didn’t know whether he should make a run for it or wait to see if Selena revealed any more. He hesitated….

“No need to fear, Alexander,” Selena told him softly. “Just cooperate and I can reveal who is really behind this.”

Ivy studied her closely. There was a stiffness to her movements, as if she was trying very hard to remain calm.

“Many of you may have noticed that I left the stadium earlier than planned,” Selena continued, raising her voice. “This was because, shortly before the Grivens contest began, I received new evidence relating to a theft that I suffered many years ago. A powerful uncommon object was stolen from me, an item that would be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

Amos’s journal, Ivy thought. That was what Selena was referring to. She considered the information it contained—all the secrets Amos had discovered about the Dirge and Selena’s involvement with them. Perhaps it wasn’t Amos Stirling whom Selena wanted destroyed in those archive photos; perhaps it was his *journal*.

“I tracked down the object,” Selena continued, “and found the thief.” Her head snapped around and she pointed a bony gloved finger at Ivy. “It was none other than your Grivens champion, Ivy Sparrow!”

People started murmuring. Ivy saw frowning faces and shaking heads. A few were counting on fingers, trying to work out if Ivy was even old enough to be Selena’s thief. Alexander gave a smug smile but remained silent.

Ivy folded her arms. Seb shifted his weight beside her, about to step to her defense….

But someone much more unexpected got there first.

“Lady Grimes!” a voice called—so cold and sharp it sliced through the air. The throng parted for Inspector Smokehart. His uniform was shredded and scorched, and ash dusted his slick black hair. “Is this the item you’re referring to?” In his gloved hand he was shaking Amos’s journal.

Ivy nudged Granma Sylvie. “*That’s* where you sent it in the Sack of Stars? To Smokehart?”

A wicked smile crept onto Granma Sylvie’s lips.

“Inspector—that’s it!” Selena cried, marching toward him. She reached for the journal, but Smokehart quickly withdrew it.

“I’ve just conducted a very interesting interview with Jack-in-the-Green,” he said. “He told us that he is an employee of yours.”

Smokehart must have been questioning Jack-in-the-Green since his arrest at the Grivens contest. Their arrangement can’t have been that solid if he was willing to expose Selena.

She laughed. “Jack-in-the-Green? Have you quite lost your senses, Inspector?”

Smokehart rapped his fingers on the journal. “And then there was this notebook that appeared in my hands. We have a resident forensic mixologist expert at the station. He only managed to decipher a few pages, but that was all I needed.”

Selena’s face twitched. She reached for the journal again. This time Smokehart grabbed her wrist with his free hand and tugged off her glove.

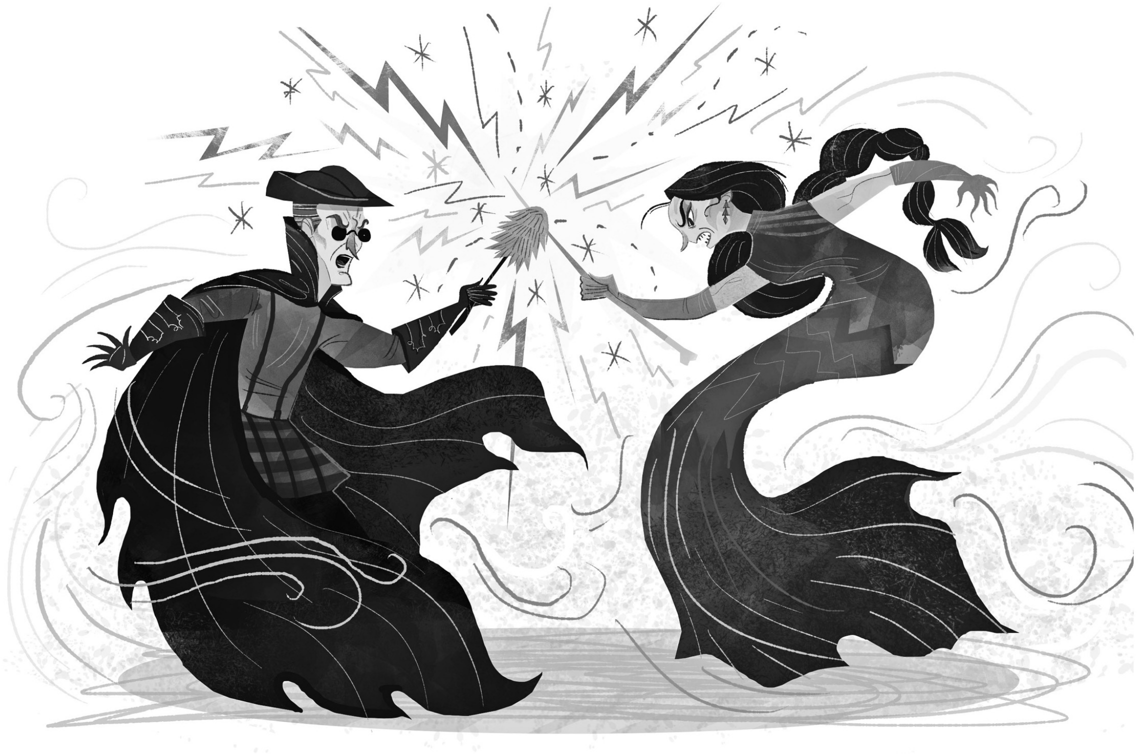
The crowd gasped. The skin on Selena’s hand was yellow with pus and writhing with maggots.

“All. These. Years,” Smokehart growled, his dark glasses fixed on her rotting fingers. “Every order you gave me, every decision you made…You were never working for the uncommoners of Lundinor, were you? You were never working on the side of the law.”

All the traders fell utterly silent. Ivy beamed at Granma Sylvie. She must have known that sending Smokehart the journal would have been enough to put Selena's true allegiance in doubt.

Selena dragged her glove back on. "Inspector," she cried, "are you quite well? You're not making sense." Selena looked over his shoulder at the troop of underguards. "Guards! Escort the inspector to the infirmary immediately; I fear he may be suffering from the pyroach attack."

She made another dive for Amos's journal, but Smokehart threw the notebook to the nearest officer, who neatly caught it and stood there waiting. None of the other underguards moved. Smokehart drew his toilet brush from beneath his cloak. "Lady Selena Grimes, I'm arresting you for being a member of a banned guild, and for perpetrating murder, corruption and the betrayal of your fellow uncommoners in the service of that guild. You do not have to say anything, but anything you do say may be used against you in a court of GUT law."



Selena leaped back, her body tensed, as if she was about to pounce. She slid her ebony cane out of the folds of her silk dress and jabbed it in

Smokehart’s direction, sending thorns splaying through the air toward him. He parried the strike with his toilet brush, frying the plants with charged blasts.

Amidst the commotion, Ivy spotted Alexander slipping away.

“He’s escaping!” she shouted, but the fight between Selena and Smokehart had everyone rapt, and no one listened.

Seb went up on tiptoe to peer over people’s hats. “That way…” He grabbed the sleeve of Ivy’s tunic and pulled her through the crowd onto the Gauntlet. Alexander had disappeared behind a hedgerow, along with someone in a long black cloak. Ivy and Seb crept after them and stopped at the corner of a cottage. Alexander and the stranger were talking.

“You have proved beyond any doubt that you are capable of great things,” the stranger said in a hoarse voice. “The Rasavatum are fools not to accept you.”

There was a sigh before Alexander replied, “Who *are* you?”

“The Rasavatum are quite brilliant,” the stranger replied. “But they will never be *great*. There is only *one* truly great guild.” The back of Ivy’s neck prickled; that hoarse voice sounded strangely familiar.

“You’re from…the *Dirge*?” Alexander asked.

Amos’s lightprint. That’s where Ivy had heard the voice before. The speaker was the same Monkshood she’d listened to in 1967.

“A boy like you could easily win a place with us someday,” Monkshood said. “You have already demonstrated rare talents, and now, I believe, you have something that could prove even more valuable.”

“The journal,” Alexander said gruffly. “You want me to tell you what I read inside it, don’t you?”

Ivy covered her mouth. Alexander hadn’t hidden Amos’s journal to protect her at all—he’d taken it to read what was inside. His curiosity had probably been pricked when he saw the smoking hourglass.

A loud *boom* shook the air. Ivy saw a flash of blue light over by the big top. “Granma Sylvie and Valian…” She turned to leave, but then listened for Alexander and Monkshood again; they had disappeared. “Let’s go,” she said urgently.

Seb hesitated for only a moment before sprinting back through the crowd and skidding to a halt on the other side.

Selena was holding Valian around the chest, her uncommon cane pointing at his neck. Its thorny brambles tightened around his throat. “Stay back,” she spat, her voice full of venom. “Let me through.” As she edged toward the Gauntlet, people hurried out of her path.

Ivy tried to catch Valian’s eye, but there were too many people around.

Smokehart, his uncommon toilet brush sparking in his hands, stepped toward Selena carefully. “There is nowhere to go, Lady Grimes. No walls to walk through here. It’s just a one-way ticket to a ghoul hole for you.”

“Never!” Selena screamed, jerking the cane.

Valian tensed. Ivy could see blood dripping down his neck.

Mr. Punch stepped forward. “There is another solution to this, Inspector,” he said wearily, inching toward Selena. “One where no one gets hurt…” His blue-green eyes picked out Ivy; she wondered what he was going to do. From under his ringmaster’s coat he brought out a chestnut-brown violin. Ivy could sense it was uncommon.

She listened closely. The voice inside the violin was screaming and sobbing in alternate beats—just like the voice that floated inside Selena. They sounded as if they were crying out to each other, as if they desperately wanted to be reunited, like two halves of the same coin.

It was *the* violin—the one Selena had given Monkshood in 1967. It contained the other half of her soul.

Mr. Punch took a deep sigh. “Be at peace, Selena Grimes.” He gently tossed the violin at her; it tumbled through the air, then suddenly sped toward her like an arrow. Both she and the violin exploded in a burst of light.

As Ivy shielded her eyes from the blast, she sensed a voice dancing at the edge of her hearing. She couldn’t be sure, but she felt—just for a second—that the voice belonged to Selena, a *complete* Selena.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The steps of the Great Cavern Memorial were covered with bunches of daffodils. Ivy saw uncommon ribbons writing messages of condolence through the blooms. Some of them spoke of the tragic loss of Drummond Brewster or the casualties of the pyroach attack, while others commemorated past victims of the Dirge.

Ivy shivered. Up until a few days ago she'd never seen anyone die. Now she'd witnessed not only Drummond Brewster's passing but also the Departure of Selena Grimes.

"They got the graffiti off, then," Seb said, staring at the empty space, which had only recently been covered in garish purple paint.

Ivy assumed Mr. Punch had had something to do with it. If anyone was able to undo Alexander Brewster's handiwork, it would be a member of the Rasavatum.

Valian scanned the shell-shocked faces of the traders. People were muttering, their arms around each other's shoulders. "Everyone feels guilty that they didn't realize who Selena Grimes really was, that they let her control them for so long."

Ivy sighed in understanding. She still couldn't believe the scale of Alexander's deception; she was angry with herself for not seeing through it earlier. "What do you think everyone will do now?"

"After the cleanup I suppose they'll elect a new quartermaster for the Dead End," Valian said, "and things will return to normal."

“But the rest of the Dirge are still out there,” Seb pointed out. “We’ve thwarted their plans twice now—they’re gonna be angrier and more dangerous than ever.”

Ivy had a sinking feeling Seb was right, though she wasn’t sure what the three of them could do about it. With the Sack of Stars destroyed, they had no way to spy on the Dirge, and she and Seb were due back to school next week anyway.

“I don’t think their numbers have reduced as much as we think they have,” Valian said. “It was in all the papers this morning: a crooked sixpence appeared at Drummond Brewster’s funeral. I think Alexander’s joined the Dirge.”

With Selena Departed, Ivy supposed there was an opening in the Fallen Guild for a new Wolfsbane. “I think we’ll see him again before this is all over,” she warned.

On the other side of the memorial a tall gray-haired gentleman came strolling toward them. His swirly blue-green eyes were familiar. Ivy elbowed the boys. “That’s Mr. Punch.”

He came to stand beside them and nodded at the memorial. “Remembering the past is not enough, of course. We must learn from it too.”

“What happened to Selena…,” Ivy said quietly. “That’s going to change things now, isn’t it? The dead will know that in order to become one of the Departed, they must unite with the uncommon object that contains the other part of their soul.” She remembered what Johnny Hands had said about accepting his existence for what it was. This new information would change all that; it was going to stir things up in every undermart around the world.

Mr. Punch straightened. “It is a powerful revelation—of that there is no doubt. The Dirge kept it to themselves in order to manipulate others. I hid it to prevent chaos. I see now that it was never my secret to keep.”

Ivy could hear the regret in his voice and considered how many other tough decisions he’d had to make over the years. How strong he was to admit his mistake, she thought.

He smiled fondly down at the three of them. “Can I expect to see you back in Lundinor next season?”

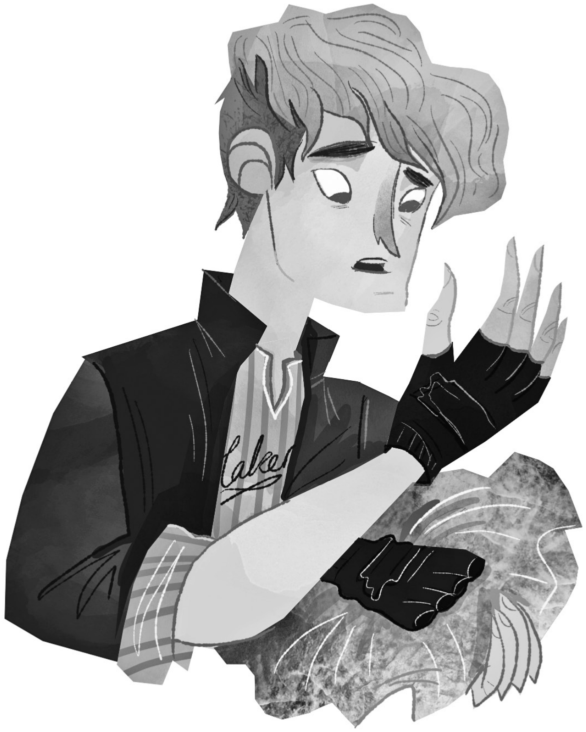
Ivy shared a nervous look with Seb and Valian. *If we survive that long.* They knew that the Dirge would have the three of them in their sights; they’d want revenge.

As if reading her mind, Mr. Punch added, “You know, it isn’t just the underguard that have been monitoring you over the past few months; a few friends of mine have been keeping an eye on you too. I will ask them to stay close this summer to make sure you’re safe. Also, I have something for each of you.” He brought three objects out of his jacket pockets: a small package wrapped in black cotton, which he gave to Seb; a gold envelope, which he passed to Valian; and a heavy rectangular parcel covered in brown paper, which he deposited in Ivy’s hands.

“For us?” Ivy wasn’t expecting a gift.

“You have proved to me that each of these is rightfully yours,” Mr. Punch told them, bowing his head. “Farewell, and good luck.”

Seb unwrapped his black package. “They’re gloves,” he said. “Drummer’s gloves. Cool.” He tried one of them on, spreading out his fingers.



Valian and Ivy smirked at each other. “They’re a bit more than that, though, aren’t they?” Valian remarked.

“They’re from a quartermaster,” Ivy added, hinting.

“Wait, you mean…I’ve just taken the glove? I can trade now?”

Ivy smiled. “It’s like Mr. Punch said—you’ve proved that they’re rightfully yours.” She was so proud of Seb. She recalled him riding that flying mop during the pyroach attack, facing his fears to save everyone in the big top. If anyone had earned the right to take the glove and become a proper uncommoner, it was him.

Valian opened the gold envelope and pulled out a card. “OK…weird.” He flashed the front of the card to Ivy and Seb. It had a gold foil border and was embossed with the words:

Dear Sir,

You are duly invited to

Forward & Rife's Grand Globe-Trotting Auction of Uncommon Treasures

Nubrook

Thanksgiving

Seb read it twice. “I don’t get it. Why has Mr. Punch given you that?”

Valian frowned. “I…don’t know. It’s strange, though—I’ve seen that company name advertised before. Your phone has a map on it, right?”

“Yeah. Here…” Seb pulled it out of his pocket and tapped the screen a few times before handing it over. “What is it?”

Valian slid his finger across the screen. “Forward and Rife—their posters were up in every undermart the Sack of Stars took me to when I asked it to find my sister.”

“So do you think Rosie has something to do with this auction?” Ivy asked.

“It’s the only thing that connects each place.” Valian studied the screen. “The undermarts I visited were here…here…here…” He went still. “You two were right—there’s a pattern. They’re moving from east to west along every main undermart.”

“It’s like the stops on a world tour,” Seb mumbled.

“Or a Grand Globe-Trotting Auction,” Ivy reread from the invitation. “That must be why the Sack of Stars took you to a different place each time—Rosie was traveling.” Hope bloomed within her; after all these years, Valian might be on the verge of finding his sister.

His eyes went glassy. “That’s where I have to go next,” he said, pointing to New York. “Nubrook undermart. It opens over Thanksgiving. That’s where I’m gonna find Rosie.”

Seb put a hand on Valian’s shoulder. “That’s great! American Thanksgiving is in November, right?”

Valian rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah, but I’ve been waiting over six years. What’s six months more?”

Ivy hadn't yet opened her parcel from Mr. Punch. She tore off the brown paper. "*Amos's journal?* But why has Mr. Punch given me this?"

"Maybe he wants you to read it," Valian suggested, passing her what was left of his flask of Raider's Tonic. "Here—use this."

Ivy counted along to page forty-two and trickled the drink down the paper; a thick white vapor began seeping out. After the fumes had dissipated she flicked through the journal, glancing at the text on every page. There was too much information to take in at one sitting. She'd have to examine the journal properly to learn what Amos knew. Perhaps that was why Mr. Punch had given it to her—so she could find out more about his work.

She stopped abruptly when she spotted a short list, underlined and numbered.

"It's a list of the Great Uncommon Good!" Seb and Valian peered over her shoulder to read it:

1. THE STONE OF DREAMS—LUNDINOR
2. THE SACK OF STARS—UNKNOWN
3. THE SANDS OF CHANGE—NUBROOK
4. THE JAR OF SHADOWS—UNKNOWN
5. THE SWORD OF WILLS—MONTROQUER

Valian scowled. "The Sword of Wills and the Sands of Change are still out there, and you can bet five grade that the Dirge will be looking for them."

Seb stretched out his fingers in his new gloves. "Maybe if we can get hold of the objects first, we might be able to hide them from the Dirge, like we did with the Jar of Shadows?"

"The Sands of Change are in Nubrook," Ivy read again, "the same undermart where Forward and Rife's auction is taking place." She examined Seb's phone, which was still in Valian's hand. The map had zoomed in on a long, rectangular-shaped island…Manhattan. Ivy had never been to New York; she suspected that before the year was out, that would all change.

—

The Cabbage Moon was quiet. Most of the other guests had gone home early after the shock of what had happened at the big top.

“It feels so long ago that I was stuffing my suitcase with clothes to *come* here,” Ivy said, cramming her pajamas inside.

Seb jumped down from the top bunk, his rucksack over his shoulder. “Tell me about it. These last couple of days have felt like an age.”

There was a knock at the door and Judy’s shiny dark bob appeared. “Hey.” She flashed them both an awkward smile. “Thought I’d come and say goodbye before you left.”

Seb’s face froze.

Judy rolled in on her skates, head down. “I bet you’re desperate to get home, aren’t you? Had enough of the freak show for a bit.”

Ivy shut her suitcase and stepped closer. “I don’t know about that.” She was eager to see her mum and dad again, but she was going to miss her uncommon friends and the extraordinary sights of Lundinor.

Judy gave a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Ivy hesitated slightly before stepping forward and putting her arms around Judy. “Thanks for everything you’ve done to help us.”

When they separated, Judy’s eyes were shining. “You’re welcome… of course.”

“Even for saving Seb’s life,” Ivy added. “Which I don’t regret—yet.”

Seb shuffled his feet, and Ivy and Judy turned toward him. He ran a hand through his hair. “Does it make me any less of an idiot if I say that I’m sorry—and that I was a total idiot?”

Ivy could see the relief on Judy’s face. “Sounds like a riddle from the Well at the World’s End.”

They both laughed. Seb gave Judy a hug, which made her blush.

“All ready to go?” a voice called from the hallway. Granma Sylvie poked her head around the door. She was carrying a beautiful Persian rug, which she dragged inside.

“We’re not flying on one of those again,” Seb moaned. “Are we?”

Granma Sylvie rubbed her hands together. “What are you talking about? This carpet is top of the range—storm-resistant, temperature-controlled. It’s even got autopilot and a pop-up air freshener.”

Judy stared at it. “Wow. That can’t have been cheap.”

“Well”—Granma Sylvie winked at Ivy—“ten thousand grade of uncommon objects does buy the best.”

Ivy grinned. She’d given half her Grivens winnings to Granma Sylvie to spend, with the understanding that Ivy and Seb were given a generous allowance every season. The other half she’d used to pay Valian back… with interest.

“What are your plans after we get home?” Ivy asked. She assumed that Granma Sylvie wouldn’t be returning to her old life, not now that her memory had returned.

She took a breath. “Ethel and I are going to do what we always intended to when we were younger—an undermart world tour.” She nudged the rug. “That’s why I got this. At my age, I plan to travel in luxury.”

Ivy scooped Scratch up from her pillow.

“Excited home to go, Scratch is,” he said, vibrating in her hand. “Seb promised with the Yoda.”

Seb’s shoulders slumped. “I promised I’d let him watch *Star Wars*—I’ll be taking a bell with no eyes to the cinema when we get back. Life as an uncommoner, eh?”

“Star Wars?” Granma Sylvie chuckled.

“What?” Seb said, incredulous. “It’s a great movie!”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that it reminds me where I sent those pyroaches through the Sack of Stars.”

“Where *did* you send them?” Ivy asked.

“To the farthest place I could think of where they’d be able to survive…,” Granma Sylvie said. “Jupiter.”

EPILOGUE

Dr. Emmet Sparrow took another sip of coffee and put his mug down on the KEEP CALM AND WORK IN A MUSEUM coaster on his desk. He stretched and yawned. It was getting late and he needed to be home on time today—he'd promised his daughter, Ivy, that they'd finish their game of chess from the other night. She'd recently discovered a fascination with board games.

He adjusted his glasses and began to remove the bubble wrap from the last object in the box. It was a piece of pottery—a vessel small enough to sit in the palm of his hand. Greek. Hellenistic period, probably.

He couldn't remember seeing it before, but then this latest donation was so large.

The vessel was painted pale blue, with white figures dancing around it. The design was unusual; it was shaped like a pithos jar—with a small disk-shaped base and handles—but, of course, pithos jars were huge and used for carrying grain or liquids. This one had no opening at all and was a *lot* smaller.

He took a small plastic box from a stack on the floor beside him. Gently he stuffed some shredded paper inside and placed the mystery pot on top. It was probably from around 150 BC, but he'd ask another expert, just to be sure.

He scribbled his notes down in pencil on the label:

ITEM NO. 743, THE CARVALHO COLLECTION
POTTERY—150 BC?

It would probably be included in an exhibition somewhere down the line because it was so unusual, but that wouldn't be for months, maybe even years.

He stuck the label on the lid of the box and closed it tightly before grabbing his jacket and heading for the door. Ivy and that chess game were waiting.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Bell's The Uncommoners #1: *The Crooked Sixpence* debuted as a Kids' Indie Next Pick and was a Children's Book Council "Hot Off the Press" selection. It was also named one of the Publishers Association's Best New Children's Books and hit the #5 spot on the *Sunday Times* children's bestseller list in the UK.

In *The Shadows of Doom*, Lundinor's spring transformation is inspired by traditional English villages and the world-famous Glastonbury music and arts festival.

When not thinking about what uncommon tape measures might do, Bell can be found talking about her other favorite stories as a bookseller at an award-winning children's bookshop in London.

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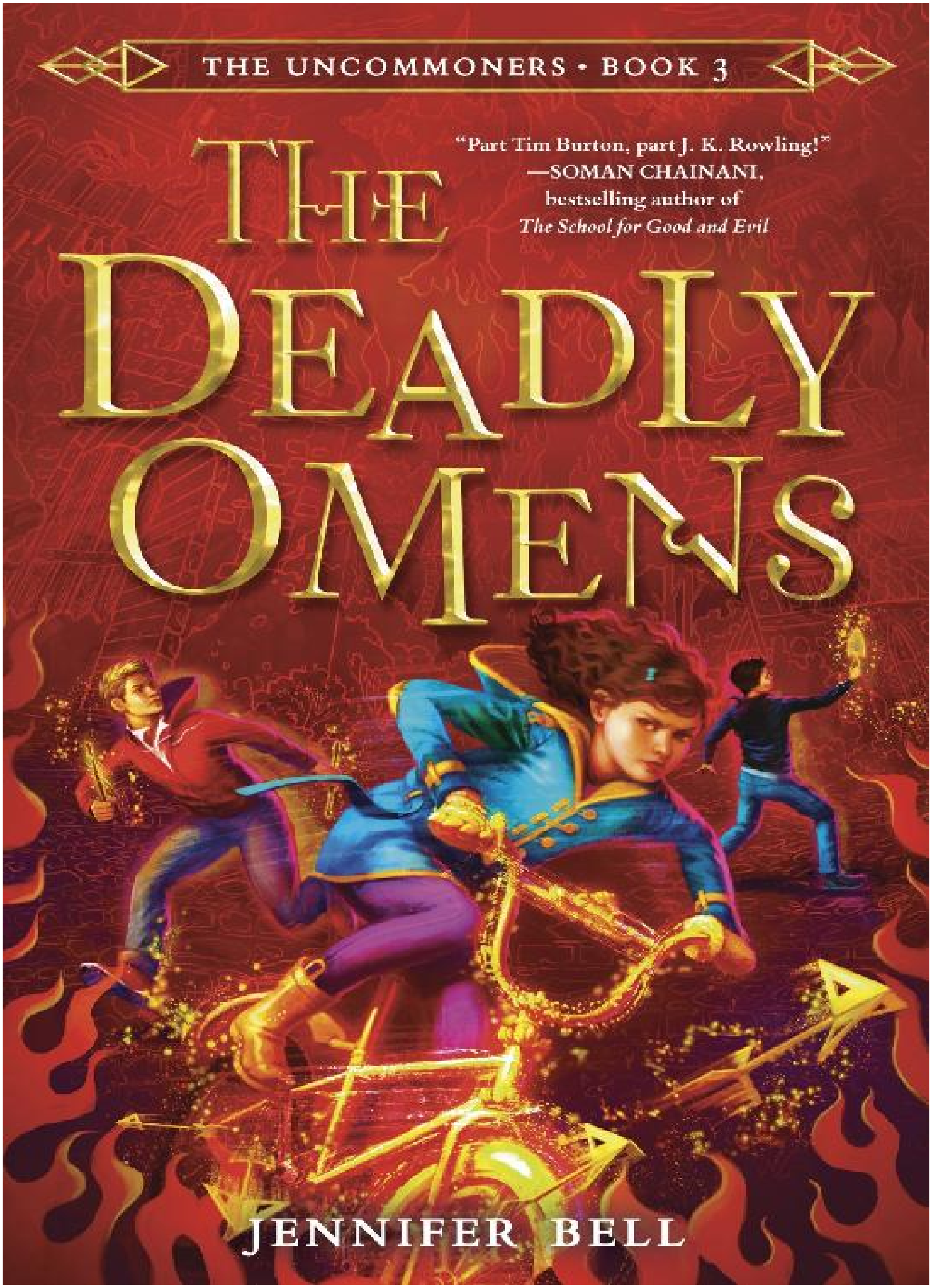
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The Crooked Sixpence
The Shadows of Doom
The Deadly Omens

BOOK THREE

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For Peter: with love

CHAPTER ONE

The new babysitter was a stout woman with a moss-green head scarf, long trench coat and round spectacles.

She was also *dead*.

“You must be Ivy,” the babysitter said curtly, dropping her bag on the welcome mat by the front door. The corners of her mouth lifted clumsily, as if she was unaccustomed to smiling. “Your mum and dad have told me all about you. You can call me Curtis.”

Ivy took a step back. Although she could sense the races of the dead, she’d never come across one on common land before. “My parents have just left to catch their train….I’ll get my brother.” She dashed up the stairs two at a time and slammed her hand against his bedroom door. *“Seb!”*

Dressed in a warm hoodie, jeans and sneakers, Seb appeared slouched against the doorframe, scowling at Ivy from under his wavy blond hair. On any ordinary evening he would have answered the door in his pajamas, but at midnight tonight they had planned to sneak away. They were going to Nubrook, an uncommon market hidden under New York City, to help their friend Valian search for his missing sister. “You’re interrupting my favorite Ripz video,” Seb snapped. “What is it?”

“Our babysitter is *dead*,” Ivy told him.

“What?” He straightened. “Are you sure?”

Ivy peered over the banister. Down in the hallway Curtis was hanging up her coat. A brooch in the shape of a forked arrow glittered on the lapel. Curtis might *seem* normal, but Ivy knew the tricky thing about most races of the dead was that you couldn't tell them apart from the living until they did something impossible—like float through a wall or transform into a giant stick bug.

"Positive," she replied. "I can feel it." As a whisperer, Ivy could detect the fragments of human souls trapped inside the dead. She widened her field of sense slowly, just as she'd practiced. The fleeting voice of Curtis's broken soul brushed at the edge of her hearing. "Her name's Curtis. If she's dead, then she must be an uncommoner. What's she doing here?"

A line appeared between Seb's thick brows. "Dad was complaining yesterday that all the local babysitters are fully booked because so many schools are closed for repairs, not just ours. Look—" He grabbed his TV remote and flicked through the channels until he found the one he wanted. A weather map on one half of the screen showed the isobars of a huge storm moving across the English Channel from Paris to London. The reporter was shouting at the camera, his coat flapping madly in the wind.

"…Meteorologists are still struggling to explain Storm Sarah's sudden appearance in Paris three days ago. The category two storm has caused widespread damage and disruption, with school and road closures throughout London and the Southeast…."

"I *tried* to convince Dad that we could look after ourselves," Seb continued, "and that we wouldn't need a babysitter for the few nights he and Mum are away at the wedding. But then Mum came home announcing she'd had a stroke of luck and had 'bumped into' an available sitter….It must have been Curtis."

Ivy's skin prickled. It couldn't have been a coincidence. She snatched the TV remote and turned up the volume to mask the sound of their voices. "What if Curtis is working for the Dirge? They employ the dead all the time. She could have been planted here to spy on us—or worse." *The Dirge*…Ivy wished she didn't have to bring them up, but it was difficult to forget the organization that kept trying to kill them.

Seb stiffened. "I've been checking the uncommon newspapers that Valian sends us; the Dirge have been linked to all kinds of incidents since the spring. Surely they're too busy to bother with us?"

Ivy could tell by the tremor in his voice that he didn't believe that last bit, although he was right about one thing: the nefarious guild's activity *had* been prolific. Their calling card—a crooked sixpence—had been found at multiple scenes of crime around the uncommon world. In the Russian undermart, Mosvok, the Dirge had been connected to several cases of blackmail and kidnapping; in China, to widespread fraud. A series of shop raids in the Egyptian undermart of Cryp bore signs of their handiwork, as did the mysterious disappearances of key officials from Ausmark in Germany. Ivy was astonished that, with so much criminal activity linked to the guild, its six members still managed to keep their identities secret.

"Now that I think about it," Seb said, his pupils flicking, "I suppose Curtis turning up might be connected to a message Valian sent me earlier. He wanted to let us know that we can't use an uncommon bag to travel to Nubrook anymore—he didn't say why—but he's given us new instructions instead."

"He has? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I couldn't risk it, not with Mum and Dad around. Don't worry; I'm sure it's nothing."

Ivy gritted her teeth. Her brother had a frustrating habit of taking everything at face value. "Seb," she said reproachfully, "Valian's been looking for Rosie on his own for seven years….He's not used to asking for help. Something could have happened—" Ivy got a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach when she thought of the repeated disappointments Valian had endured in his search for his little sister. She was determined to do everything she could to help him now. "This trip is his best chance yet to find her," she said, "so we've got to be there every step of the way."

Seb's cheeks flushed guiltily. "All right then, let's leave now for Nubrook. I don't fancy sticking around here to learn whether Zombie Poppins is planning to kill us or not." He dragged his prepacked backpack out from under his bed and switched off the TV. Ivy collected her things from her bedroom, stuffing an extra sweater into her satchel. A thick, leather-bound book poked out the top. The front cover was embossed with a symbol: a smoking hourglass. Seb glanced at it warily.

"You're bringing Amos Stirling's journal?" he asked. Ivy understood his concern. The journal was a notebook containing many dangerous secrets about the Great Uncommon Good—the five most powerful uncommon objects in history—and it attracted all kinds of trouble.

“I’ve only been able to translate a bit of it,” she told him. “Amos wrote in languages not even Google understands. He’d discovered all sorts of things about the Great Uncommon Good, and he was trying to prevent the Dirge from getting hold of them. If I leave the book here and Curtis finds it…”

“…the Dirge will learn all Amos’s secrets,” Seb finished. “I get it.” He led her into the bathroom, shutting the door behind them. Ivy closed the blinds at the window.

“Did Valian tell you there was a secret entrance to Nubrook hidden somewhere in *here*?” she asked, thinking of the time she and Seb had entered Lundinor via a shed in a garden. There were many different ways of accessing London’s undermart; perhaps entering Nubrook was the same.

“No,” Seb replied, “his instructions were weirder than that.” He plugged the sink and ran the taps. “ ‘Wash your hands and find the man in red.’ That’s what he wrote.”

Ivy wondered why Valian had been so obscure. She tapped her satchel. “Scratch, are you listening to this? Do you have any idea what Valian means?”

The bag vibrated against her hip. She unfastened it and pulled out a damaged steel bicycle bell. Like all uncommon objects, the bell felt strangely warm against her skin, as if it had been resting in the sun.

“Finally goings!” exclaimed a childlike voice coming from the bell. “Never journeys to Nubrook has Scratch before.” Ivy could hear the fragment of soul whispering inside Scratch—the very thing that made him uncommon. “Hmm. Unsure Valian why wantings hands clean,” he added.

Ivy’s shoulders slumped. Even with Scratch’s back-to-front way of speaking, she understood his meaning.

A door slammed shut downstairs: Curtis was moving around.

With renewed urgency, Ivy steadied Scratch on the edge of the basin, pumped some liquid soap into her palm and lathered it up. Perhaps everything would become clear if she followed Valian’s advice exactly. As she rinsed her hands she became aware of a broken soul somewhere nearby. She could tell by the clanging sound of its voice that it was trapped inside an uncommon object—

But this one wasn’t coming from inside Scratch. Ivy opened the cabinet above the sink and saw, sitting on one of the shelves, a silver soap dish with two dolphin-shaped handles. “Seb,” she said, “*this* is uncommon.”

“Is it?” He eyed the soap dish nervously as Ivy removed it from the cabinet. “I’ve never seen it before. What’s it doing here?”

Ivy turned the dish over to examine it from all sides. “Maybe Valian sent it? That could be why he told us to wash our hands—because he wanted us to find it. What do you think it does?” She deliberated the possibilities. Every object gained a special ability when it turned uncommon.

“Experimentings should Ivy,” Scratch suggested helpfully, knocking against the taps. “Good way of discoverings uncommon uses.”

Taking his advice, Ivy tried floating the soap dish on the surface of the water. A strange green froth appeared, churning around the dish and quickly swallowing it under. Before Ivy had time to decide whether that was a good thing or not, a shout erupted up the stairs.

“Do you need me to COME UP?” Curtis boomed. There was an unmistakable edge of suspicion in her voice.

“We won’t be a moment!” Ivy called back, trying to sound as casual as possible.

Seb rattled the door, checking it was locked. “We need to be quick,” he hissed. “Curtis might already have an inkling that we’re planning to leave. She must have noticed you look more prepared for mountain-climbing than bed.”

Ivy studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her messy auburn curls contrasted sharply with the navy blue of her duffle coat. In her thick cargo trousers and clean hiking boots, she was dressed exactly as Valian had advised: she was ready for anything.

“We’d better try something else,” Seb said, combing his fingers through the soapy water to locate the dish.

There was a sharp grating sound—

—and then Seb disappeared.

“Seb!” Ivy leaned over the basin, still careful not to make contact with the water. The soap dish had vanished along with Seb.

A distinct *creak* sounded in the hallway: Curtis was climbing the stairs. Ivy projected her thoughts inside Scratch: *Help! Do you know what’s happened to Seb? Should I touch the water?*

Thinkings is Scratch, she heard him reply in her head. *Ivy must being carefuls.*

The ability to communicate with him like this was a recent development. To begin with, Ivy had only been able to hear vague murmurings coming from the fragment of soul inside Scratch, but now she could distinguish full sentences and send her own conversation back. She was learning that the more she used her whispering, the stronger her talents became.

The landing groaned.

Curtis outside! Scratch warned her.

With no other option, Ivy quickly shoved the bell back into her satchel. She splashed her hand in the basin, just as Seb had done, causing tickly bubbles to immediately rush up her nose. "Ah-*choo*!" she sneezed. In the split second her eyelids were shut, she heard another sound, shrill and scraping—

And the next moment she was standing in the shaky hull of an underwater vessel. Seb stood beside her, his nose scrunched up, as if flies had just flown up both his nostrils.

"What just happened?" he asked, rubbing his face. "Where are we?"

The metal craft was the size of a tugboat; it was round at both ends with a transparent hood of bubbles that sealed it off on all sides like a wobbly sunroof. Beyond it, the craggy forms of rocks were just visible in the murky water, and, closer to the vessel, Ivy spotted the elegant curves of a silvery dolphin.

"We're *in* the soap dish!" Ivy realized. Judging by the strong current, they were submerged in a stream or river. The air reeked of chlorine mixed with perfumed soap, like the changing rooms at the swimming pool.

“Welcome aboard this aqua-transport vessel number 2895,” said a machine-like voice. Ivy didn’t know where it was coming from; there were no speakers or controls visible inside. *“What is your desired destination?”*

“Nubrook,” Ivy said.

The grating sound came again, like metal grinding over stone. The soap dish began rocking, knocking them to their knees. Seb clutched his stomach. “*Ugh*…I feel sick….”

“We’d better stay down until it’s over,” Ivy advised. She didn’t know how long it was going to last or how turbulent it would be.

Then the dolphin at the rear of the craft flicked its tail, sending them speeding forward. Ivy held on to the sides for support. Their surroundings were full-sized, so she presumed the dish had enlarged after moving to its present location; but she still wasn’t sure how she and Seb had been transported inside.

They swept through tendrils of muddy pondweed before moving into clearer water and diving deeper. As they zoomed along, Ivy gazed through the swirling rainbows in the hood at slow-swimming fish and barnacle-encrusted pipes. They were soon skimming over a dark and sandy plateau. *The seabed.*

In no time at all, the dish began to ascend. It rose to the surface of the water and, with a heavy shunt, beached itself on a platform. The bubble hood burst, and Ivy jolted as a wall of noise hit her in the chest.

“Welcome to Nubrook,” declared a jolly voice, “the deepest undermart in the world!”

CHAPTER TWO

The happy voice belonged to a red-cheeked man in a paisley shirt, who offered Ivy his hand as she stepped out of the soap dish onto a short jetty. “Mind your step, please,” he cautioned.

“Thanks,” she mumbled. Other soap dishes were moored in the same long canal; it cut across the limestone floor of a vast arrivals hall teeming with people. Iron lampposts shaped like dancers posed around the edge of the chamber, each holding a glowing uncommon lemon squeezer.

“Land! *Finally*—” Seb staggered out behind her, his face pale.

Something hit Ivy on the arm and she looked down to find a tatty paper pamphlet at her feet. She picked it up and read the front cover: *Nubrook: Farrow’s Guide for the Traveling Tradesman.*

“Free guide to Nubrook!” called a boy with an American accent as he walked along the jetty. He tossed a few pamphlets at another soap dish. “Discover the secrets of the undermart that built *down* while commoners were building *up*.”

Farrow’s Guide…Ivy had been given one about Lundinor too. The guidebooks were written in a strange back-to-front code that Scratch was able to decipher; others needed uncommon binoculars to read them.

“Exit’s that way,” the man in the paisley shirt said, pointing to the end of the jetty. He handed Ivy the dolphin-handled soap dish, which—somehow—had returned to its original size.

She shook the dish dry and stuffed it and the leaflet into her satchel for safekeeping before grabbing Seb’s jacket sleeve to steer him in the right direction. The color soon returned to Seb's cheeks as they began walking. A horde of aqua-transport travelers jostled past them; Ivy had to swerve to avoid a girl wearing a gold-fringed sari and deerstalker hat, while Seb almost got sandwiched between two bald men dressed in flares and Roman sandals. "Hobsmatch," Seb murmured, sidestepping a lady in an evening gown and cowhide waistcoat. "Uncommon style must be the same no matter where in the world you are."

Ivy thought fondly of her Hobsmatch outfits hidden in her wardrobe at home. The fashion was to wear as many different styles of clothing at once, but, in keeping with Valian's advice, she and Seb had decided not to bring theirs along. Hobsmatch might be dizzyingly spectacular, but it certainly wasn't practical.

Standing at the end of the dock was a woman in a navy-blue uniform. She had a white sash draped over one shoulder and a smart peaked cap. Seb nudged Ivy's shoulder as they approached her. "She's got to be a Nubrook underguard," he said under his breath. "They're the only uncommoners I've ever seen in uniform."

The woman looked different from the underguards who policed Lundinor, although she carried the same weapon tucked into her belt: an uncommon toilet brush, capable of electrocuting anyone who didn't abide by the Great Uncommon Trade laws.

"Afternoon, folks," the officer said solemnly, blocking their path. "I must ask you both to shake my hand before proceeding. Security's been heightened as a result of this morning's news: we're monitoring everyone traveling on the waterways."

This morning's news? Wondering what had transpired, Ivy produced her white uncommon dress gloves from her satchel. Unique to each trader, they recorded every deal the wearer made. Ivy's pair looked remarkably clean considering she had to wear them *all* the time in undermarts. Seb's uncommon drummer's gloves, she noticed, were decidedly grubbier.

"Sorry, we didn't catch the headlines," Seb said, extending his hand. "What's happened?"

The officer's voice hardened. "Thieves broke into the private vault of a quartermaster in Montroquer three days ago. The investigators only released their findings this morning."

Ivy knew that Montroquer was a famous undermart in Paris. Like all undermarts, it was presided over by four quartermasters. She hadn't heard anything about a break-in, but then Valian hadn't sent any uncommon newspapers for over a week.

"Evidence revealed that the thieves spent two weeks tunneling under Montroquer to gain access to the vault," the officer continued. "A crooked sixpence was discovered at the scene: it's the Fallen Guild who are responsible again."

Ivy swallowed. The Fallen Guild was meant to be a less shiver-inducing name for the Dirge.

The officer stepped aside to let them pass. "They must have wanted something important," Seb commented as he and Ivy walked away, "if they went to so much effort to steal it. I wonder what it was…."

Ivy tried to push the Dirge to the back of her mind as they crossed the floor, surveying the crowd. They had to focus on helping Valian find Rosie, not become distracted by other problems.

"This is going to take ages," she moaned. "We don't even know what this 'man in red' is. It could be a symbol on a wall or the name of a shop inside Nubrook—"

"Or someone wearing red Hobsmatch," Seb added, scouring the floor for anyone who might be him. "Trouble is, there are so many uncommoners here, I can already see three people dressed in red. Why couldn't Valian have told us to look for a man in a banana costume? Now, *that* we could spot easily."

Ivy wondered whether they were meant to have arrived later, because it would have been quieter then. As New York was five hours behind London, it was currently only two in the afternoon in Nubrook. "We'll just have to keep searching. Maybe we should look for a man in red doing something out of the ordinary?"

"Sure," Seb muttered, ducking to avoid a boy surfing overhead on a flying doormat, "because we're surrounded by ordinary right now."

Everywhere Ivy looked, people were arriving on the back of airborne uncommon objects. Mops, vacuum cleaners and carpets, all carrying several passengers, were shooting out of giant holes in the ceiling, swooping low over the crowd, then settling on landing strips that ran parallel to the aqua-transport canals.

Finally, after a good ten minutes, Ivy's attention was drawn to a lone man in all-crimson attire. He was leaning against an old wooden chest of drawers in the shadow of the cavern wall, fiddling with the chain of a pocket watch. "What about him?" she suggested. "He's not hurrying off anywhere."

Crossing the floor to investigate, they noticed the man in red kept checking the time, over and over like he was waiting for something to happen. Suddenly he dropped the watch into his pocket and pulled open the bottom drawer of the chest.

The ground rumbled….

With a loud crackle, a fountain of tiny gold lights erupted from the open drawer like the sparks of a Roman candle. Where they landed, regular-sized uncommoners appeared out of thin air, stretching their arms and rolling their shoulders as if they were all about to do a yoga class. Then, after smoothing out their Hobsmatch, they all strolled off into the swelling crowd.

"Valian!" Seb yelled, jumping and waving at the same time. "Over here!"

With a blink of surprise, Ivy picked out Valian's scrawny figure weaving toward them through the throng. His straggly dark hair shone with sweat, but he brightened when he saw them. "What are you two doing here? I wasn't expecting you for a few hours yet; I was going to wait around."

"Is everything all right?" Ivy asked urgently.

Valian's mouth drew into a grimace as he wiped his forehead with the back of his fingerless glove. "Yeah, fine. I just hate traveling in those impossibly cramped drawers. I've had my face pressed into a stranger's back for the last twenty minutes." He threw a scowl over his shoulder as if it might hit the person in question. "Unfortunately, it's the fastest way to move long-distance at the moment. The International Uncommon Council banned bag travel this morning so as not to worsen Storm Sarah."

"*That's* why you changed the arrangements…," Ivy said with a sigh of relief. For some reason, bag travel affected the earth's geothermal gradient. She knew of at least one occasion when an increase in uncommon bag journeys had caused a snowstorm in London, so perhaps the IUC's decision was for the best.

“I had to send the soap dish last minute by ghost-courier,” Valian explained. “I take it you found it all right? Sorry about the vague instructions—there was a phantom in the line behind me at the featherlight mail tower and I didn’t like the look of him one bit.”

“We figured it out,” Ivy told him, gathering that there had probably been a ghost in their bathroom earlier. “How does drawer travel work?”

“Stationmasters in red operate the chests,” he said. “A different drawer is opened every few minutes. Each one leads to another drawer in another part of the world.” He signaled toward the far end of the hall, where a monumental arch decorated with elaborate Art Deco carvings was cut into the stone wall. “That’s the entrance to Nubrook,” Valian said. “Let’s go.”

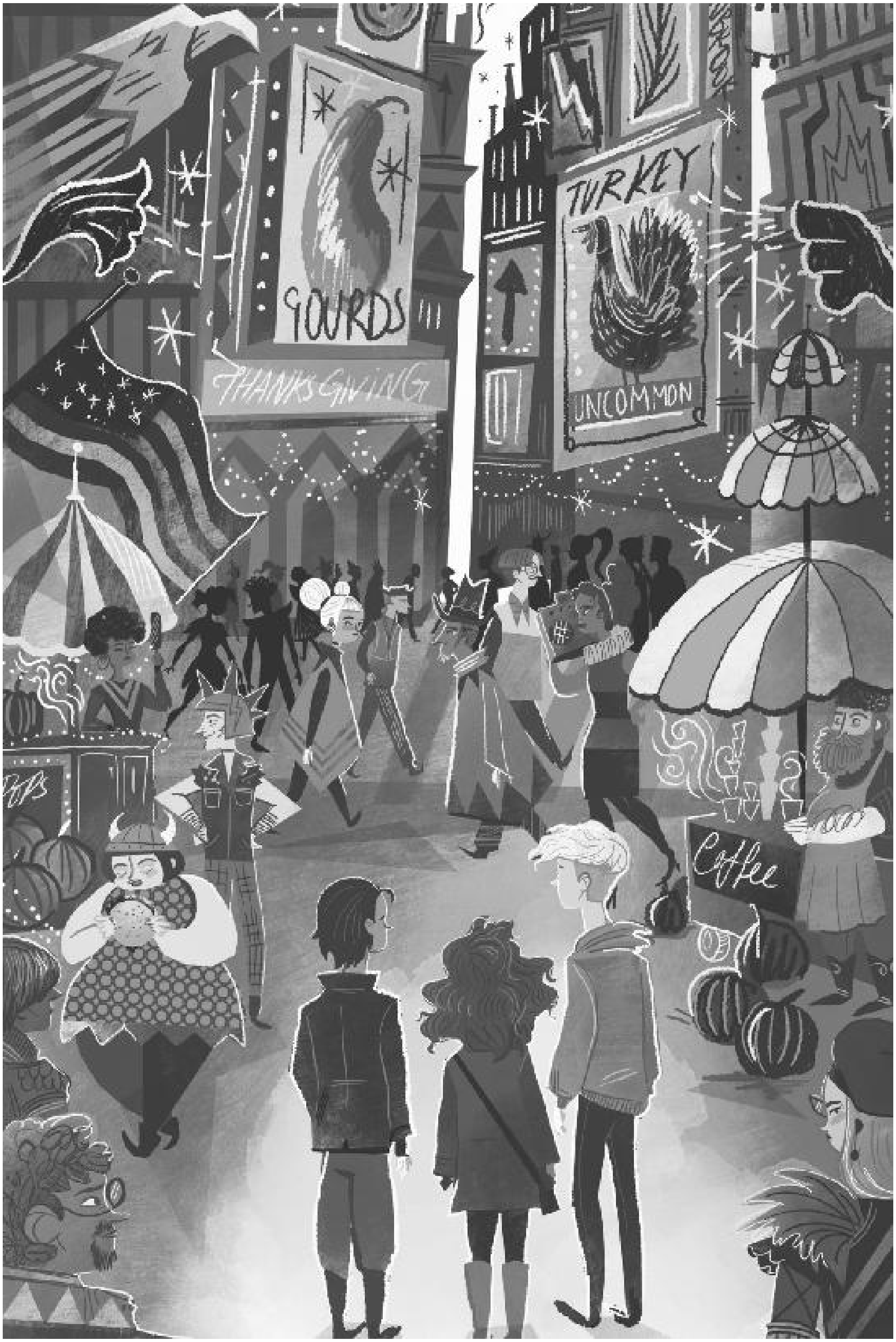
They zigzagged across the arrivals chamber, doing their best to avoid the swinging legs of riders dismounting from vacuum cleaners, then squeezed through the giant vaulted passage along with everyone else. Valian marched ahead, cutting a path through the masses. Ivy understood his urgency: like most undermarts, Nubrook only opened at certain times of the year, and Valian had been waiting for this visit for six months.

She realized that he wasn’t wearing his trademark red basketball shoes as part of his Hobsmatch, which was very odd. Instead, he had on a pair of brown leather boots, so worn at the heel that she could see his socks poking through. “I know they look awful,” he admitted, catching her gaze. “But they’re uncommon: they allow me to step through most walls, like the dead do. I bought them with the winnings you gave me from the Grivens tournament. You never know when they might be useful, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible for this trip.”

The heat and noise turned stifling as they reached the other side. “It’s always busy around here,” Valian shouted. “This way.”

As Ivy stumbled after him, her eyes darted around like she was watching an aerial display. Nubrook’s buildings were covered in dazzling neon signs and flashing lights, all demanding her attention. Mounted on the walls, giant tablecloths played advertisements like the screens in Times Square, while music blared from conch shells on either side. She thought of the uncommon bedsheets used to stream live video in Lundinor; uncommoners called those devices materializers.

“Whoa,” Seb breathed, looking at the illuminated billboards on the rooftops. “This is insane.”


GOURDS
THANKSGIVING
TURKEY
UNCOMMON
Coffee

Thanksgiving decorations adorned almost every building. Glittering chains of acorns were draped around window frames, and star-shaped wreaths of wheat and cornhusks hung from doors. Valian guided them to an area of pavement dotted with pushcarts selling coffee and hotdogs. The tempting aroma of fried onions filled the air.

Ivy stared up at the distant concrete ceiling festooned with crystal chandeliers the size of hot-air balloons. She could sense Scratch inside her satchel, giddy with excitement. “I assumed Nubrook would be in a huge cave like Lundinor, but it feels more like we’re inside a massive shopping mall,” she said.

Valian laughed. “Nubrook’s famous for being entirely man-made. The best thing about it are the basements. Some shops have fifty floors below street level—each one with a different theme.”

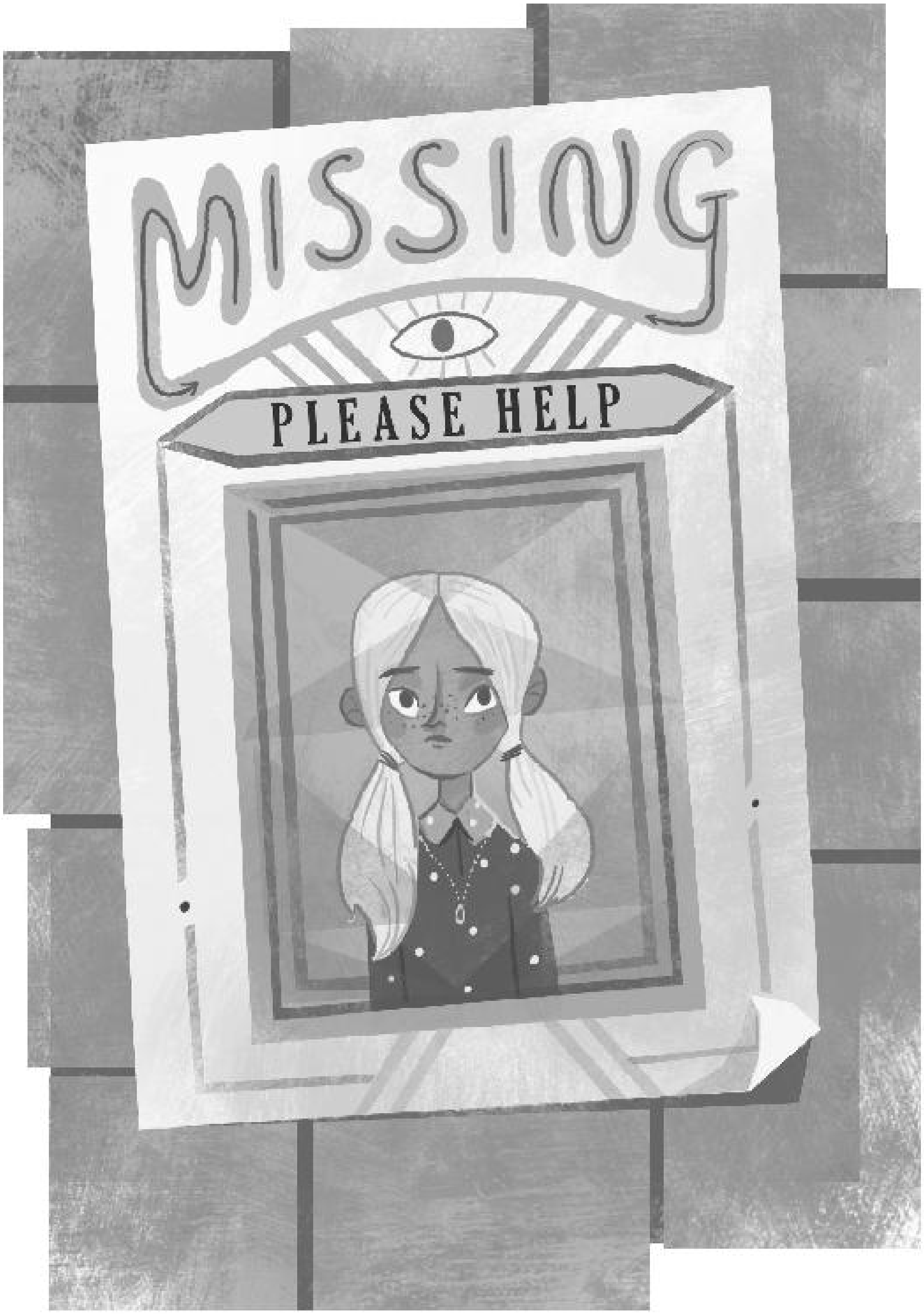
*The deepest undermart in the world…*Now Ivy understood why.

“Nubrook has four different quarters, like other undermarts,” Valian continued, “but here they’re one on top of each other. We’re in First Quarter now. Second, Third and Fourth are below us.” He removed three white table tennis balls from his jacket pocket. “Here, take one of these. Throw it at every blank surface you can find—walls, storefronts, doorways, drain covers….We need as many people as possible to see them.”

Seb arched an eyebrow. “How is playing ping-pong going to help us find Rosie?”

Valian dropped a ball to the floor. It gave a low *ping* as it sprang off the pavement and returned to his hand. Where it had fallen, a colorful poster appeared printed on the concrete. In bubble writing at the top were the words MISSING PLEASE HELP and below them was a photo of a little girl dressed in Hobsmatch.

Rosie.


MISSING
PLEASE HELP

“Uncommoners use table tennis balls to copy things,” Valian clarified. “You load them up by repeatedly bouncing them on the image you want copied.

Then, when you next throw them against something, they leave behind an exact duplicate stamped on the surface.”

“It’s faster than using a photocopier,” Seb remarked, “I’ll give you that.”

Ivy noticed Valian’s baffled expression and shook her head. “Never mind,” she reassured him. (It was easy to forget how little Valian knew about the common world, having lived all his life in undermarts.) She tucked her ping-pong ball in her pocket and took a closer look at the poster. Ivy had only seen a picture of Valian’s sister once before, but the family resemblance was clear: Rosie shared Valian’s sloping cheekbones and fierce brown eyes. Her ice-blond hair was tied in bunches, and a silver necklace hung over the top of her polka-dot blouse.

“That picture was taken on the morning she disappeared,” Valian said, “when she was six. She’ll look different now…she’ll be twelve—thirteen next month.”

Ivy committed the details of Rosie’s image to memory. “Her hair color’s really striking. People should remember if they’ve spotted her.”

“That was my hope at first too,” Valian said, his voice hardening. “The trouble is, no one ever *has* seen her. I’ve used all kinds of uncommon objects to search, but nothing works. The only thing I’ve learned is that she’s definitely alive.”

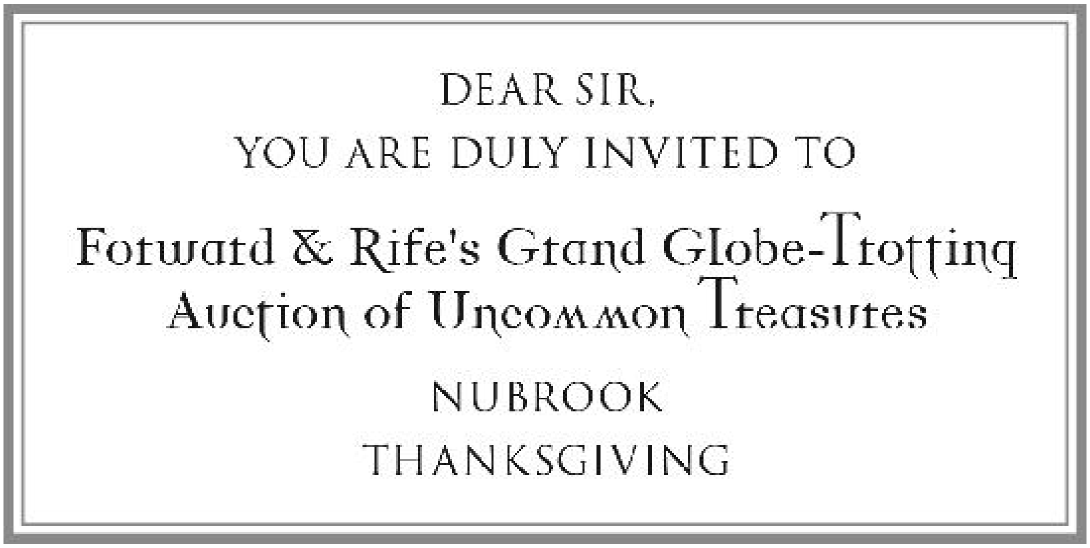
Ivy saw the determined expression on Valian’s face. His parents had died not long before Rosie had gone missing, so he’d shouldered the responsibility of finding her all on his own. She admired him; it must have taken a great deal of courage to take on the task by himself.

“Something uncommon must be hiding her,” Seb concluded. “It’s the only explanation.”

“Yeah, but without knowing what object that is, I can’t undo its effects.” Valian shook his head. “It’s got something to do with what happened when I tracked her using the Sack of Stars. You remember—before it got destroyed, it brought me to where Rosie was, only it couldn’t settle on one location, as if she was in several different places at the same time.”

It was a frustrating puzzle. The Sack of Stars, one of the five Great Uncommon Good, had taken Valian tantalizingly close to his sister, but with no results. Ivy had gone over the facts all summer, trying to find a solution. “At least that invitation Mr. Punch gave you has provided you with another clue,” she said.

Valian put his hand in his pocket and removed the card with the gold border that Mr. Punch had given him in Lundinor. He reread it carefully.



DEAR SIR,
YOU ARE DULY INVITED TO
Forward & Rife's Grand Globe-Trotting
Auction of Uncommon Treasures
NUBROOK
THANKSGIVING

“Mr. Punch might be the smartest man in Lundinor, but he’s also the most secretive,” Seb warned. “We still don’t know why he gave you that invitation in the first place—or why he gave Ivy Amos’s journal.”

Ivy thought about Mr. Punch, one of Lundinor’s quartermasters. She considered him mysterious, it was true, but he’d also demonstrated he was brave and selfless, defending Lundinor from the Dirge’s evil schemes.

“All I know,” Valian said, tapping his thumb against the card, “is that, according to the Sack of Stars, wherever Forward & Rife’s auction has traveled to, Rosie has been there too. There’s got to be a connection between them.” He lifted his chin as he continued walking. “So this is my plan to find her: investigate the auction house, distribute the posters, ask as many traders as we can if they’ve seen her. If Forward & Rife are here over the next few days, there’s a strong chance she will be too.” He squinted along an adjoining road. “Come on, the auction house is this way.”

As they set off, the clamor of a thousand fragmented souls—both those trapped inside uncommon objects and those that had formed races of the dead—invaded Ivy’s ears. Although most murmured wordlessly, Ivy limited her senses to Scratch, aware she’d get a headache if she tried to listen to all the others. Bustling through the crowded streets, she scanned the faces of passersby, seeking brown eyes and blond hair. It was silly to think that Rosie might walk by, but Ivy felt they should be searching all the time. She noticed several somber-faced dead traders hovering about, each with a cardboard sign hanging around their neck. All the signs displayed a drawing of a different object with the caption HAVE YOU SEEN THIS? followed by a list of identifiable details. Ivy had never spotted one of the dead with such a sign before. She wondered if maybe the practice was unique to Nubrook.

After a short while, they arrived at their destination. Forward & Rife's auction house was situated in the lush rooftop garden of a tall marble building. A burly-looking security woman in a tartan kilt and chain-mail tabard stood outside the entrance to the building on the ground floor. "It's invite only," she informed them, peering doubtfully at Valian's scruffy boat shoes.

"Right—yeah," Valian muttered, fumbling with his gold-edged invitation before handing it over. Ivy realized he was probably more accustomed to sneaking in to such events.

The security woman read the card, and then flashed them an admiring glance. "Oh, you're guests of Mr. Punch? Please, come in."

They were ushered through a courtyard and onto an intricately patterned Chinese rug, which ascended to the roof as gently as a napkin floating in the wind. The air turned thick with flowery perfume as they stepped into the garden. Narrow stone pathways ran between the exotic plantings, labeled according to species. Dotted among the ornamental bonsais and potted cacti stood glass cabinets exhibiting the objects due to be auctioned in two days' time. A catalog was attached to the side of each. Uncommoners in elaborate Hobsmatch milled around, clinking champagne glasses and scrutinizing the articles for sale. Security guards shuffled between them.

Ivy took a look inside the closest display case. It contained two objects: item number 235—a decorative ceramic music box once owned by Queen Victoria; and item number 236—a solid-gold magnifying glass, which, according to the catalog, could magnify a person's talents. A hastily scribbled note in the corner of the case explained, however, that it had been withdrawn from sale.

"Do you think that music box really belonged to Queen Victoria?" Seb asked.

"It's doubtful," Valian said. "I've done loads of research on Forward & Rife, and there were several reports of them getting into trouble for false claims. Mr. Rife owns the company. I got the impression he was a bit of a charlatan."

"What do you mean 'was'?" Ivy questioned, her curiosity spiked. "Did you find out anything else about him?"

Valian shrugged. "For the last five years there haven't been any accusations of dodgy deals at all. It seems Mr. Rife must have cleaned up his act." He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Although…," he went on, "for a man with nothing to hide, he is impossible to get hold of. I sent him several featherlight messages, hoping he might be able to explain the connection between Rosie and his company, but they were all returned unread.”

They moved on to the next case. Inside was a long-stemmed pipe turned from cherry wood. Its bowl was engraved with an elaborate pattern.

“I don’t believe it.” Valian gasped, pressing his nose to the glass.

“ ‘Item number 245—tobacco pipe, *circa* 1565,’ ” Seb read in the catalog. “ ‘Allows the user to speak any language on Earth. Scouted in Bolivia by Cherry and Florian Kaye’—” He looked up. “*Kaye*—isn’t that *your* surname, Valian?”

Valian’s voice faltered. “Cherry and Florian Kaye are my mum and dad.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ivy hadn’t often heard Valian talk about his parents. All she knew was that they had been scouts, like him: people who hunted for uncommon objects in the common world before selling them.

“I didn’t know that my parents had traded with Forward & Rife,” he said in a small voice.

“Do you remember them going to Bolivia?” she asked.

He nodded. “They were always away on business. They’d only just gotten back from their last trip when they were—”

Ivy lowered her gaze. On some occasions he managed to say “murdered” straightaway; at other times the word got stuck in his throat. She couldn’t imagine how painful it was to say aloud that your parents had been killed by the Dirge.

A burst of applause interrupted their conversation. Valian shook his head clear and walked around a wall of bamboo to see what was going on; Ivy and Seb hurried after him. Standing beside another display case was a suave-looking gentleman with a quiff of silver hair and deep wrinkles around his twinkly blue eyes. A spotted handkerchief peeped out of the breast pocket of his crushed velvet jacket, which he wore with matching cape and moccasin boots. An ostrich feather in his blue buccaneer’s hat quivered as he spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he announced in a smooth voice that told Ivy he was used to charming a large crowd. “My name is Mr. Rife, and it is my honor this afternoon to introduce to you some of the extraordinary treasures in the Forward & Rife collection. First, we have this paper knife from London, England.” He held up in his gloved hand a small gold dagger with an enamel handle.

Valian’s face widened. “That’s *him*! According to my research, he’s attended every single auction Forward & Rife have ever held. He’s the person most likely to have noticed Rosie. We have to talk to him.”

“As I’m sure you all know,” Mr. Rife was continuing, “uncommon blades give the user complete control over one or more variables. You may find swords that adjust speed, daggers that modify direction or knives that can manipulate weight. The higher the grade of the uncommon blade, the greater the number of forces it can control, and this delightful paper knife can control the energy between molecules, allowing it to alter states of matter.” He stepped aside flamboyantly to reveal a large vase of water. The audience murmured in anticipation. “For this demonstration, I will require the assistance of an absolute beginner: someone who’s never used an uncommon blade before.” His gaze moved through the audience and came to a stop above Ivy’s shoulder. “Sir, what about *you*?”

Seb looked left and right before pointing to his own chest. *“Me?”*

“Now, don’t be shy,” Mr. Rife chided, “this is going to be fun.”

Seb’s blank face said it all.

Valian elbowed him in the ribs. “Go on—we might learn something useful about the auction.”

Seb groaned as he trudged up to the front. Ivy felt a twinge of sympathy. She’d seen her brother with that same sweaty, pale-faced look whenever he went onstage to play a gig with his band. He always got nervous in front of large numbers of people.

Mr. Rife whispered something into Seb’s ear, and he mumbled a response. “Thank you, Seb Sparrow from London,” Mr. Rife said, holding the uncommon paper knife out toward him. “If you’ll just take this, please.”

Seb cradled the knife in his hands, staring helplessly out into the audience.

“Today,” Mr. Rife declared, holding up his finger in the air, “I shall prove that even a novice can operate this remarkable object. First, I will ask Seb to attempt to use the knife to turn this liquid”—at this his hand swept over the vase of water—“into gas.”

“Er, how am I supposed to do that?” Seb mumbled.

“Just try it,” Mr. Rife insisted.

With a sigh, Seb swished the paper knife over the vase like he was using a magic wand. Nothing happened. A few people sniggered.

“Good effort, Seb, but not quite enough,” Mr. Rife said. “The key is to think of uncommon knives as dials that you can turn up or down. Now, imagine this knife has invisible threads attached to it and, by moving your hands on either side, you can manipulate those threads in order to operate the dial inside the knife."

"OK…" Adjusting his stance, Seb stared at the paper knife, his face straining with effort. Very slowly, he moved his hands apart.

The knife remained floating in midair. The crowd gasped. Mr. Rife pressed the tips of his fingers together. "Excellent. Now point the knife at the vase."

Seb shifted his palms, tilting the handle so that the blade was directed toward the water.

"And finally," ordered Mr. Rife, "to operate that dial inside the knife, send it spinning clockwise."

Heeding Mr. Rife's instruction, Seb pulled his hands wider to set the knife in motion. As the blade rotated, tiny bubbles appeared in the water.

"That's it, keep going!" Mr. Rife encouraged as steam rose from up out of the vase.

Concentrating hard, Seb thrashed his hands back and forth as if he was playing air guitar.

The vase steadily filled with steam. "And there we have it!" Mr. Rife announced. "The liquid is now—"

But someone clapped too soon, making Seb jolt. His hands flew wider; there was a high-pitched whistle and then, with a crack, the glass shattered, sending a spray of icy shards over the audience.

Quicker than lightning, Mr. Rife whipped his cape from his shoulders and threw it over the vase, containing the explosion. The audience ducked; some people shielded their faces with their hands.

"Is everyone all right?" he called. "I think our young volunteer may have turned the gas into a solid by mistake."

Seb mumbled an apology, but it was lost in the subsequent cheering.

"Bravo, Mr. Rife! Well saved!"

The audience straightened themselves back up again and applauded, while Mr. Rife beckoned a cleaner to come and tidy up the mess. Seb handed back the paper knife and hastily returned to his place, drying his face on the end of his sleeve. Amid the commotion, a loud *bang* suddenly resonated from the other side of the garden, and several people turned their heads to see where it was coming from. A few flinched and pulled displeased faces.

Mr. Rife's neat gray brows lowered. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. In an hour's time I will be demonstrating the so-called Frozen Telescope of the North—recovered from a shipwreck in the

Arctic Bay. Please help yourself to another glass of champagne while you wait.” His smile withered as he hastened away.

“Come on,” Valian said. “Now’s our chance to talk to him.”

The ostrich feather in Mr. Rife’s hat bobbed above the trees as he strode along, making him easy to spot. Ivy, Seb and Valian trailed him to the edge of the roof, where he turned into a stairwell leading down through the building. They paused at the top when they heard voices.

“…yes, my assistant’s a little deaf, so she probably didn’t hear you knock.” (*Mr. Rife*—though he sounded frailer than before.) “Is there a problem, officer?”

“I’ve been sent by the master of Second Quarter,” said a cheerless voice. “You still haven’t paid your trading taxes for last spring: objects to the value of thirty-two and a half grade.”

There was a shuffle. “The thing is, grade-flow’s a little slow at the moment. I’m sure you understand—because we travel so much, it can take weeks to collect all the payments.” He continued hastily, “I *am* delivering a gold magnifying glass after the auction in two days’ time. The buyer is a gold obsessive and will pay generously. I’ll have more than enough grade to settle the debt then.”

“I see….” The other speaker paused. “Can’t you visit this buyer earlier? Or perhaps I could collect the payment from them on your behalf?”

“Afraid not,” Mr. Rife said. “The buyer insists on concealing their identity, so goes by the alias Midas. Only *I* am allowed to collect the grade myself.”

“In that case, I’ll visit you again on Friday to recover what is outstanding. Good day, sir.”

Ivy, Seb and Valian stumbled backward as a broad-shouldered underguard appeared at the top of the stairwell. He eyed them suspiciously from under the peak of his cap before walking away. When Mr. Rife didn’t emerge, Valian took a few steps down. “He’s gone inside. Let’s talk to him now—he might reveal more if he’s distracted.”

At the bottom of the stairs they found an old wooden door covered in peeling green paint. Hanging from the knocker was a chalkboard scrawled with the words *Offices of Forward & Rife.*

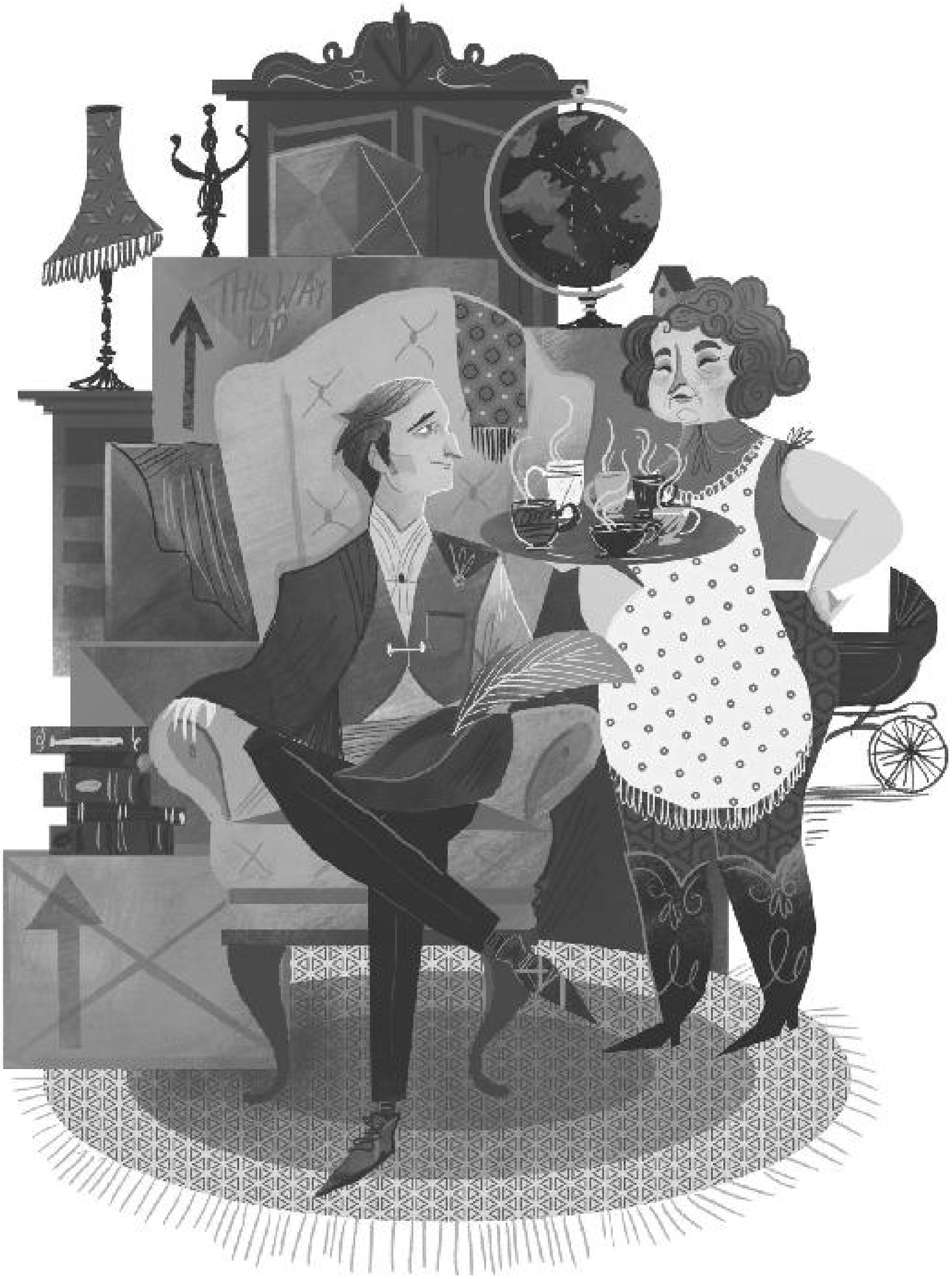
“That conversation doesn’t make sense,” Seb observed. “If Forward & Rife can afford this fancy rooftop garden and all that champagne, why can’t they pay their debts?”

“Perhaps the firm’s in more trouble than Valian’s research made us all think,” Ivy speculated.

She knocked twice on the door. After a moment they heard Mr. Rife answer soberly, “Come in, it’s open.” The hinges creaked as they entered a dimly lit living room. Cardboard boxes bursting with polystyrene nuggets filled the spaces between the furniture. Half-hidden under a silvery blanket, a celestial globe and antique pram stood in one corner of the room, while a doorway at the back appeared to lead into a small kitchen. Mr. Rife sat in one of the two leather armchairs, his buccaneer’s hat resting in his lap. He squinted at them. “Oh—Seb, wasn’t it? What can I do for you?”

Before Seb could answer, there came a rattle from the kitchen and an elderly woman carrying a tray of teacups hobbled out. She had dark hair and a round belly. A flowery apron partially covered her Hobsmatch: a high-necked blouse and glittery Capri pants. “Tea’s made for your guests, Mr. Rife,” she said in a husky southern drawl. “I’d just boiled the water when I heard them come in.”

Mr. Rife looked at the ceiling. “And yet somehow, Mrs. Bees, you failed to hear the underguard knocking at the door. Thank you anyway.” He smiled apologetically at Ivy, Seb and Valian. “My housekeeper is uncommonly fast at making tea. Don’t feel obliged to drink it if you don’t want to.”



“Thank you, tea would be lovely,” Ivy said, smiling at Mrs. Bees as she took a mug filled with the pale-yellow liquid. From its floral perfume, she guessed it was chamomile—Ivy’s mum’s favorite. She thought of her parents at the wedding and hoped they were having a good time.

“You’ll have to be careful with that cup; it leaks,” Mrs. Bees warned. She hurled Mr. Rife an accusing stare before offering the tray to Valian and Seb. “I would buy a new set, but *we can't afford it.*" She rested the final cup on the arm of Mr. Rife's chair before scowling at him again and marching back into the kitchen.

Mr. Rife sighed. "You might as well sit down. You'll have to stay until you've finished your tea or else I'll never hear the end of it."

Ivy perched on the edge of a cardboard box, Seb on a moth-eaten footstool.

"I'd prefer to stand," Valian said, placing his teacup on the mantel above the fireplace. Then he said, "We're here because we need your help, Mr. Rife." He cleared an area of the floor and dropped his ping-pong ball onto it. Rosie's poster appeared immediately. "We're looking for this girl, and we've reason to believe she's in Nubrook. Do you recognize her?"

Mr. Rife leaned forward. "Hmm…" He looked at the poster, then at Valian, and then back again. "You're related?" he asked.

"She's my sister."

"Yes, you look alike. I'm very sorry she's missing. But I'm afraid I've never seen her before."

Valian's face tightened. "We think she might have visited several of your auctions. Are you positive you haven't noticed her hanging around?"

"Certain," Mr. Rife said, checking the poster again. "I'm excellent with faces. I'm sorry, I can't help you."

Ivy's stomach dropped. She thought of what they'd overheard on the stairs and said, "We can pay you for any information. Please try to think harder. You must have seen her—we discovered that she's been following your auction company around the world."

"I assure you, it would be quite impossible for anyone to do that," Mr. Rife declared. "Mrs. Bees and I travel using—" He stopped himself. "Look, I'm sorry I can't be more useful, but I really must get back to my guests, which means you need to leave." He pushed his buccaneer's hat onto his head and rose from his seat. "Good day."

So much for "stay until you've finished your tea," Ivy thought, putting down her mug.

Valian looked empty and bewildered. Ivy knew he'd pinned all his hopes on finding Rosie here. She couldn't bear it if they left with nothing. "We understand," she said. "We'll get going." She turned to the door that led out up to the roof garden, hoping Seb and Valian would trust her enough to play along. The shuffle of footsteps told her they did. Quickly, before they left the room, she extended her senses to the walls, trying not to wince as her ears were bombarded with the gabble of broken souls. With a little focus, she identified the fleeting whisper of one of the dead among them: it was Mr. Rife. She scanned the uncommon objects in the room: the vintage pram in the corner immediately drew her attention. She'd never sensed a soul so restless or fidgety before, like a spider trapped in a jar. She listened carefully, trying to focus on what it was saying, but it was speaking too quickly for her to understand, and—before she knew it—Mr. Rife had ushered them out of the door. He slammed it shut behind them, breaking Ivy's concentration. She pursed her lips in frustration.

"Did I miss something?" Seb asked as they trudged back into the garden. "What was that all about?"

"I was using my whispering to examine the room," she said, "but I hadn't really finished—and my senses don't stretch far enough to continue doing it from here." As they wound their way back through the trees and flowerbeds she told them about the pram and Mr. Rife being dead. "Do you think Mr. Rife was telling the truth about Rosie?" she asked.

"Hard to tell," Valian said in a suspicious tone, "but if he does know something, it seems he's not going to tell us willingly. We need to do more digging."

"How could he be so certain that Rosie hadn't followed him?" Seb asked. "I know the dead travel super-fast, but Mr. Rife said that he and Mrs. Bees traveled *together*—and she is living."

Ivy's head jerked around. She hadn't extended her senses as far as the kitchen to where Mrs. Bees was, so she hadn't been able to check. "How can you be sure?"

"She was bleeding from a cut on her finger," he replied. "There are only two races of the dead who can bleed: Sasspirits and the Eyre Folk, and Mrs. Bees can't be either of those."

"Since when did you know what a Sasspirit is?" Ivy had never heard of that race of the dead before.

"Sasspirits look human but they have superior hearing and brilliant memories," he explained. "Mrs. Bees didn't hear the underguard knocking, so she can't be a Sasspirit. And she didn't have swirly black holes for eyes like the Eyre Folk…so she must be living." Seb shrugged, adding, "Scratch has been giving me a few lessons about the dead. You know…just in case."

Ivy got the feeling there was more to it than that, but before she could delve deeper Valian said, "Mr. Rife must be using that uncommon pram to get around. They're super rare. I've never seen one before, but I've heard stories about them. If you sit inside one, you can travel short distances faster than the speed of light.”

“No wonder Mr. Rife didn’t want to tell us about it,” Seb quipped. “What grown man is going to admit that he rides in a baby’s pram?”

“If Rosie was traveling faster than light, it would explain why the Sack of Stars sent you to several different undermarts in such a short space of time to find her,” Ivy said to Valian. “Perhaps she has a pram too?”

Valian kicked a plant pot in frustration. “But where would Rosie have gotten an uncommon object that powerful? And why would she be trailing an auction company in the first place?”

Ivy shook her head, lost for an answer. “I wish I knew.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Ivy and Valian followed Seb across a wooden bridge into a small Zen garden covered in patterned dove-gray shingle. The place was quiet and empty, although the rumble of applause could be heard coming from somewhere on the roof. Valian took out his ping-pong ball and set about replicating Rosie's missing poster every few meters along the decking.

"I'm sorry we didn't learn more," Ivy said gently. "At least this whole 'traveling by pram' thing seems to confirm the link between Rosie and Forward & Rife. And we've still got another day to look for her before the auction on Thursday."

"Yeah." Valian squeezed the ball. "I don't know…sometimes it bothers me that Rosie's never come looking for me. It might be that she can't for some reason, or maybe it's that she doesn't want to. She could have a great new life somewhere else."

Ivy understood that seven years was a long time for doubts to fester. "Valian," she said gently, "Rosie's your sister. Wherever she is, and whatever has happened to her, I guarantee that she misses you." Then she added, in a more mischievous tone, "Even I don't like it when Seb goes away for long periods of time, and he's an idiot."

Valian smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Hey, guys, look at this!" Up ahead Seb stood beside an empty display cabinet. Resting on top was a gleaming silver telescope, the length of his forearm. The metal was engraved with tiny stars joined by straight lines—

constellations. " 'The Frozen Telescope of the North,' " he read from the catalog. "Mr. Rife said he was giving a demonstration with this item next."

Ivy wondered if Mr. Rife had taken the object out to practice for the demonstration and had forgotten to lock it away afterward. Curious, she probed it with her senses. The broken soul within it chattered furiously, as if it was trying to stay warm. Perhaps a whisperer had given it its nickname.

"It says here that uncommon telescopes gaze back in time to allow us to discover something new about our past," Seb told them. "They're like the opposite of uncommon clocks."

"Except that clocks are useful," Valian remarked bitterly. "They predict the future so that you can stop bad things from happening. It doesn't matter what a telescope shows you: you can't change the past."

Peering at the freshly printed trail of posters they were leaving in their wake, Ivy replied, "No, but you can learn from it. If we aimed the telescope back to the time when Rosie disappeared, it's possible we could unearth a fresh clue."

Valian looked left and right, checking they were alone. With a shrug, he picked up the telescope. "Anything's worth a try."

"I'll keep a lookout around the corner in case people start arriving for the demonstration," Seb offered, passing Ivy the catalog.

"The instructions aren't that detailed," she said, running her finger across the page. "To direct the telescope's gaze, you must 'first recall a moment you wish to look back to'; then to focus, 'concentrate on an image of someone who was present.' " Her insides went heavy, realizing that all of Valian's memories around the time of Rosie's disappearance were probably painful to recall. "You can do this," she encouraged.

Valian nodded gravely and lifted the telescope to his eye. "Does it say anything else?"

"It warns about paying attention to what you find," Ivy replied. "You can't revisit the same period again, and everything will go dark once the vision is over."

"Something's happening," Valian said suddenly. "I can see my parents arguing in our kitchen. Rosie and I are hiding under the table. I remember this! It's the night they were murdered."

Ivy could hear the panic rising in his voice. Perhaps if she helped direct his thoughts, he'd be able to concentrate. "Try to relax," she told him. "What other details do you notice?"

"On the table is a collection of objects with numbered labels," he said, describing the scene breathlessly. "Twenty-five of them. My parents must have brought them back from their latest scouting trip. It looks like they've used a fork to grade them, and a feather has automatically written the results on a piece of paper—I think that's what my parents are arguing about."

Ivy had witnessed the use of an uncommon fork before—one tap of its prongs against an uncommon object and a number between one and ten rings out. The higher the grade, the more powerful the object. "Can you read what it says?"

"Almost…" Valian adjusted his grip on the telescope, then gave an exasperated sigh. "No, it's gone. Rosie and I have just jumped out, surprising our parents. Something fell off the table and Rosie put it in her pocket. The only object missing is number seventeen—it must have been that one…" He flinched. "Wait, I can see the paper now…."

After a short pause he lowered the telescope. His face was pale.

"Is that the end of the vision?" Ivy asked.

He nodded slowly. "I saw the list. It only went up to number seventeen—the object Rosie got hold of." He took a couple of deep breaths, as if he was trying to calm down.

"Why did your parents stop there?"

"Because object seventeen was a Grade *Ten*."

Ivy went rigid. The only objects believed to be Grade Ten were the Great Uncommon Good.

"Security guards," Seb called, jogging toward them. "Two of them, coming this way." Then he read their expressions. "What happened?"

Taking the Frozen Telescope from Valian's hands, Ivy placed it back where they had found it. "I'll tell you, but first Valian needs to sit down."

A safe distance away, they found a stone bench nestled under an arbor of drooping wisteria. Valian slumped on the edge of the seat; Ivy and Seb perched on either side.

Ivy briefed Seb about their discovery. "Back then, the Great Uncommon Good were still a myth," she said, keeping her voice low. "Valian's parents must have scouted one of them by accident and only realized what it was when they graded it at home. Rosie can't have understood what it was either."

"That's got to be what's hiding her," Seb said. "Perhaps she picked it up and started playing with it. It could even be the whole reason she disappeared. Who knows what powers the object has."

"It must also be the reason my parents were killed," Valian said in a hollow voice. "I've always known the Dirge did it and how it was done, just never why." He stared at his feet, saying nothing more.

Ivy recalled the details of his parents' murder. They had been poisoned with a mixture of toxins including tongueweed—a foul uncommon substance that makes you tell the truth before you die. "The Dirge must have realized that your parents had one of the Great Uncommon Good and came looking for it," she said softly. "That could be why they used the tongueweed—it would have forced them to reveal the object's location."

Valian gave a slow nod. "Except, when the underguard examined our house afterward, it looked like someone had raided the place—smashing furniture and tearing through walls. If my parents had revealed the object's location, then the Dirge wouldn't have needed to search like that." His shoulders slumped. "I think Mum and Dad had no idea that Rosie had accidentally taken the object. They couldn't tell the Dirge where it was, and they were killed as punishment. They died for nothing."

Ivy shook her head but she wasn't sure what to say to make Valian feel better. He dropped his face into his hands and they all fell silent.

It was Seb who finally spoke. "Your parents would want you to find Rosie," he said. "We're getting closer to understanding what happened to her. We just need to figure out which one of the Great Uncommon Good she has."

"Seb's right," Ivy agreed. "Are you sure you didn't catch sight of the object through the telescope?"

Valian wiped his nose and lifted his head. "No. It was small enough to fit in Rosie's pocket, that's all I know."

"If it's one of the Great Uncommon Good, there's got to be something about it in here." Ivy unfastened her satchel and withdrew Amos Stirling's journal. She began flicking through the blank pages, counting. "We know Mr. Punch has the Stone of Dreams, and the three of us destroyed the Sack of Stars and hid the Jar of Shadows, so Rosie can't have stolen any of those. Amos knew the whereabouts of the remaining two Great Uncommon Good when he wrote this in the 1960s. I just need some raider's tonic to activate the uncommon ink."

Valian pulled a small silver flask out of his leather jacket. "Like I said, I came prepared for this trip." He took a hefty sip (the uncommon concoction was normally drunk as an antidote to shock), and then he handed it over to Ivy.

The scent of lady's perfume wafted up from the bottle. Ivy drizzled a little of the liquid on page forty-two and, with a low hiss, a thick white mist seeped from the paper before words began to appear. She skimmed through till she found what she was looking for—a list of five objects and their locations.

1. The Stone of Dreams—Lundinor
2. The Sack of Stars—Unknown
3. The Sands of Change—Nubrook
4. The Jar of Shadows—Unknown
5. The Sword of Wills—Montroquer

"Numbers three and five are the ones we're interested in," she said, holding up the page so Valian and Seb could see it for themselves.

" 'The Sands of Change—Nubrook,' " Seb read. " 'The Sword of Wills—Montroquer.' So…both objects were hidden in undermarts."

Valian drummed his fingers on his knee, connecting the dots. "My parents scouted on common land, but they always visited local undermarts on their travels. They could have returned from a scouting trip to either New York or Paris."

"Is there any way to find out which one?" Ivy asked.

"Yes, but not here." He rose to his feet. "We need to go to the Bureau of Fair Trade. There's one in every undermart. It's where uncommon glove records are stored. We'll be able to see who my parents last traded with."

They left the rooftop via the Chinese rug and walked across the courtyard toward the exit from the building. The patio was flanked by rows of terracotta urns, each twice the height of Seb. As they made for the door, Ivy spotted a familiar figure step out from behind one of them.

"Quick—" She grabbed three auction catalogs from a nearby stand and threw two of them at the boys. "Cover your faces with these."

Seb fumbled with the pages as he flapped his open. "What's the matter?"

Ivy peered over the catalog spine. Ahead of them, a bespectacled woman in a moss-green head scarf was making her way out of the building. Fixed to the lapel of her long trench coat was a glittering brooch in the shape of a forked arrow.

"Over there," Ivy whispered. "It's Curtis."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Why am I pretending to be interested in"—Valian glanced at the page—"a set of uncommon *hair rollers*?"

"Curtis is our babysitter," Seb hissed. "We think she's working for the Dirge—that's why we left home early."

"Your *babysitter*?"

"She got the job under suspicious circumstances," Ivy clarified. "Also, she's dead."

Simultaneously, they all risked a peek from behind their catalogs. Standing in the line to leave, Curtis pushed her glasses farther up as she examined a small gold object in her hand.

"She's reading a security cufflink," Valian said. "Uncommoners use them to track stolen items. The left link shows the longitude and latitude of wherever the right link is, and vice versa. Both of you had better check your pockets—I bet she's planted one on you."

Hiding behind one of the large urns, they all put their catalogs down. Ivy rustled around inside her pockets, but they were all empty, and Scratch let her know that there was nothing in her satchel that she hadn't packed. After searching through his jeans and hoodie, Seb tried the pouch on the side of his backpack. Slowly he withdrew a square gold cufflink. "But my bag was stuffed under my bed all day before we came here," he spluttered. "How did she—?" His brows jumped as he realized. "Oh. The walking-through-walls thing."

After taking the cufflink, Valian rotated the toggle twice before placing it back in Seb's hand. "I've deactivated it now. Curtis must have used it to follow you here from London, but it doesn't make sense that she's working for the Dirge."

"That's what I thought at first," Seb admitted. "But the truth is, we've thwarted their schemes twice before. They probably want us out of the way so we can't interfere again."

"The Dirge are definitely up to something," Ivy agreed. "Think of that recent theft in Montroquer."

Valian shook his head. "If Curtis had been ordered to kill you, she could have done it while she was hiding that cufflink. She must have some other motive for tracking you here."

After checking that Curtis had gone, they walked the remaining distance to the door and left the building. In the street outside, they spotted Curtis slinking away through the crowd.

Valian began hurrying after her. "The Bureau of Fair Trade is in that direction anyway," he said. "Come on, let's see where she goes."

Ivy, Seb and Valian tailed Curtis as she advanced down the road. Before long she ventured through the revolving doors of a huge shopping mall—or at least Ivy supposed it was a shopping mall until she saw the flying road signs.

"This is new," Seb said, raising his voice above the babble of chatter.

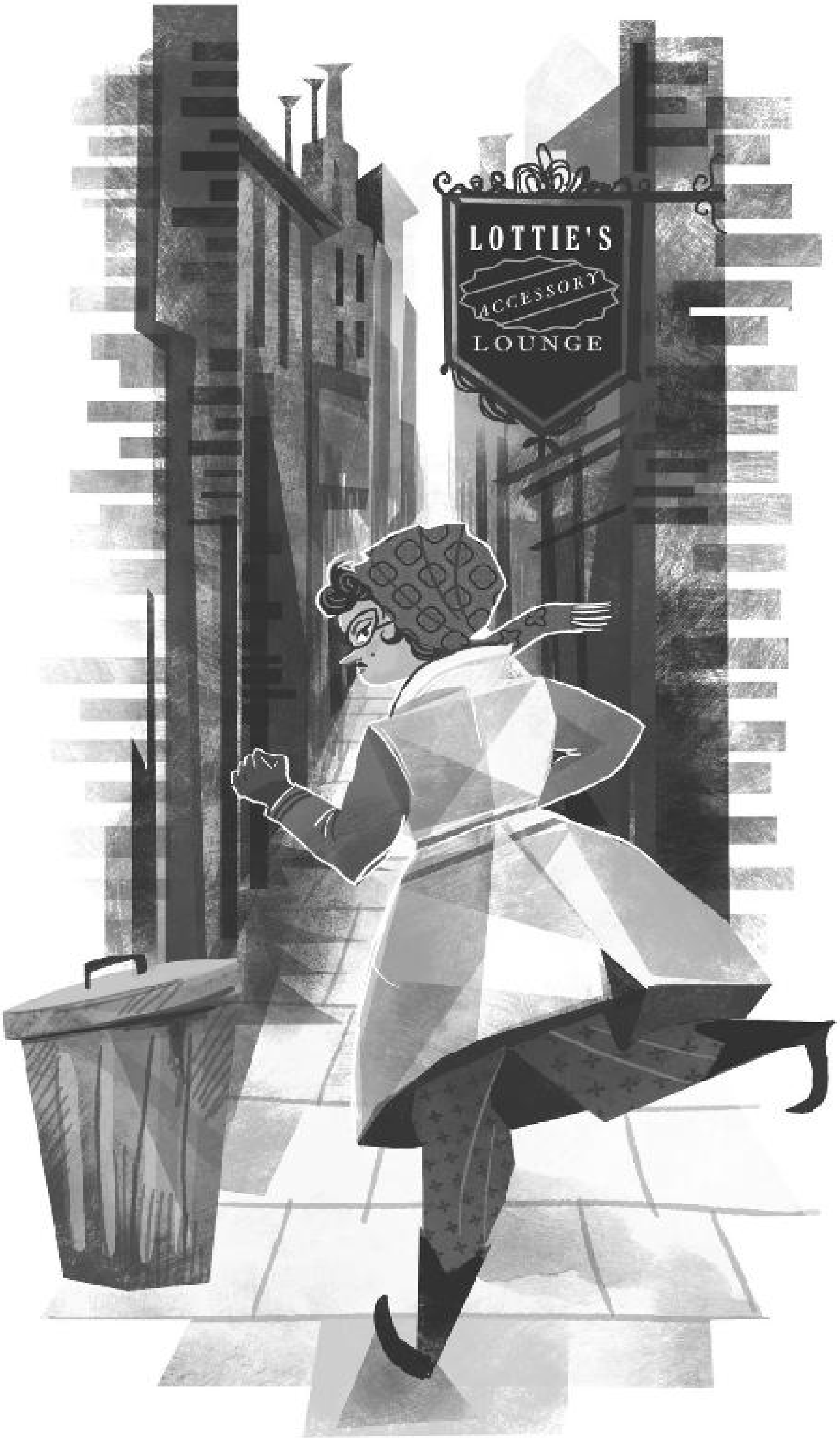
There were no shops inside the building. It was just a vast atrium filled with airborne road signs—everything from an octagonal red stop sign to a blue-and-white H for HOSPITAL—all ferrying passengers up and down. Depending on the size and shape of the sign, between one and three people sat with their legs dangling over the edge, like they were riding a chairlift. Ivy peered down into the void. Everything was enveloped in shadow after a few hundred meters. "How far down do they go?" she asked.

"All the way to Fourth Quarter," Valian replied. "They have these all over Nubrook. The Bureau's down in Third Quarter." He ushered them to the boarding zone, where the three of them clambered onto a large INTERSTATE 86 placard, a few signs behind Curtis's.

Ivy expected to feel a lurch when they started moving, but the ride was so smooth even Seb wasn't bothered by it. She sat between him and Valian, keeping watch on Curtis ahead of them. The atrium walls were plastered with handkerchief materializers advertising everything from stand-up comedy pogo sticks to honey dippers that “Point you exactly where you want to be.”

At the exit for the Third Quarter, Curtis dismounted her diamond-shaped TRUCKS CROSSING sign and headed along a litter-strewn main road—Ivy, Seb and Valian in pursuit. The pavements were pockmarked with chewing gum, and the air smelled sour, like moldy banana skins. The area reminded Ivy of the East End of Lundinor, by far the shabbiest quarter there.

Curtis veered off into an alleyway between two dilapidated buildings. A skip near the entrance was loaded with mannequin body parts, plastic hooks and splintered shelving units. An old sign hung from a wall. “Lottie’s Accessory Lounge,” Ivy read.


LOTTIE'S
ACCESSORY
LOUNGE

Valian edged around the corner. “I can’t see her. She must have vanished.”

“I’m not sensing her either,” Ivy said, extending her whispering along the alley. “Although, there is another broken soul here.” A voice was murmuring nearby. Using it as a beacon, Ivy homed in on a dusty mirror leaning against the side of the skip.

The three of them gathered around it. Ivy knelt down and ran her hands over the wooden frame, rubbing off the dirt to reveal a carved emblem at the bottom: a forked arrow. “That’s the same design as the brooch Curtis wears,” she noted. “There must be a connection.”

“Uncommon mirrors are used to hide things,” Valian said cautiously. “You have to tell them a secret before they’ll reveal what they’re hiding. Whatever this mirror’s concealing might explain why Curtis is interested in you.”

Ivy tried to think of something she’d never told anyone before, but it was surprisingly difficult. She could sense the soul inside the mirror giggling breathlessly, excited at the prospect of hearing some gossip.

Hang on…that’s it!

She hadn’t yet spoken to Seb or Valian about her new whispering skill; she hadn’t said it aloud to anyone. “I have a secret. You know how I can listen to the souls trapped inside uncommon objects? Well, now I can talk to them too.”

“You *can*?” Valian regarded her suspiciously.

Ivy covered her face with her hair. “I’ve only spoken to Scratch—and that bell in the Grivens tournament last spring.”

Suddenly their reflections wobbled. The surface of the mirror rippled in concentric circles and plunged into itself in the middle, forming the inside of a giant silver cone. Ivy yelped as her feet were dragged from under her and her vision blurred. She threw out her arms for balance.

When her sight cleared she found herself in an empty slate-tiled hallway; the alleyway had vanished. Dim spotlights cast an emblem onto a strip of carpet: a forked arrow. Seb was there opposite her, standing with his back to a door, and Valian crouched beside him. “The mirror must have been hiding a portal to this place,” Seb said breathlessly.

“I can hear voices,” Valian hissed. “We need to hide.”

Ivy used her whispering to check: there were at least two of the dead approaching, possibly with other living uncommoners. She noticed a mirror-shaped opening in the wall behind, like a shadow cut out of the slate tiles. “Should we go back?” She could feel Scratch shivering in her satchel: he was frightened.

Seb took a long tape measure from his pocket. Ivy recognized it as the uncommon one he’d been given in Lundinor last spring. “I’ve got a better idea,” he declared. “Stand next to me, both of you.”

Ivy couldn’t think what her brother had in mind but, with people drawing closer, there wasn’t time to argue about it. She squashed herself under Seb’s armpit as he got the tape measure ready in front of them, as if he was going to start skipping backward with it. Valian tucked himself in on his other side.

“I haven’t actually tried this before,” Seb confessed, “but think of it as a jump rope. On the count of three—one…two…”

“Whatever you’re doing, just hurry,” Ivy urged. “They’re almost here!”

“Three!” Seb flicked his wrists, sending the tape measure flying up past their faces, over their heads and back down behind them toward their heels. Seb, Ivy and Valian all jumped as it scuffed the carpet under them and looped up again.

An odd sensation slithered through Ivy’s body, like her skin was being pulled in different directions. “What’s happening?” Her perspective warped so quickly that she felt nauseated. The hallway looked like it was getting bigger.

“It’s working!” Seb cried. “Keep jumping. We’re not quite small enough yet—”

Small enough? Ivy made a second assessment of the hallway: it actually *was* getting bigger. With every leap over the tape measure, the ceiling soared farther away.

After a few more bounces, Seb stopped. The walls loomed over them like mountain faces. “That should do it,” he decided, returning the tape measure to his pocket. “No one will notice us now.”

Valian swayed on the spot, looking disoriented. Ivy’s mouth hung open. It had all happened so quickly….She couldn’t quite believe it, but judging by the carpet fibers that stretched past her ankles, the three of them had shrunk to the size of insects.

Before her senses had had time to adjust, a pair of scuffed gray sneakers the size of double-decker buses came floating around the corner toward them. Ivy craned her neck and, with a jolt, recognized their male owner: dirty blond hair, grubby skin and a wonky red-and-blue jester’s hat.

“Is that *Johnny Hands*?” Valian exclaimed.

The ghoul was dressed in the same scruffy waistcoat and torn jeans that he normally wore as Hobsmatch. Ivy had no clue what he was doing there. As far as she was aware, Johnny Hands worked for Mr. Punch in Lundinor.

Next, pounding the floor with her boots, Curtis appeared at Johnny Hands’s shoulder. The glittering divergent arrow brooch on her trench coat matched the design of the badge that Johnny Hands had pinned to his hat.

“Let’s try one of my ideas this time,” Ivy said, noticing one of Johnny Hands’s laces dragging along the floor. “How are you two at climbing?”

CHAPTER SIX

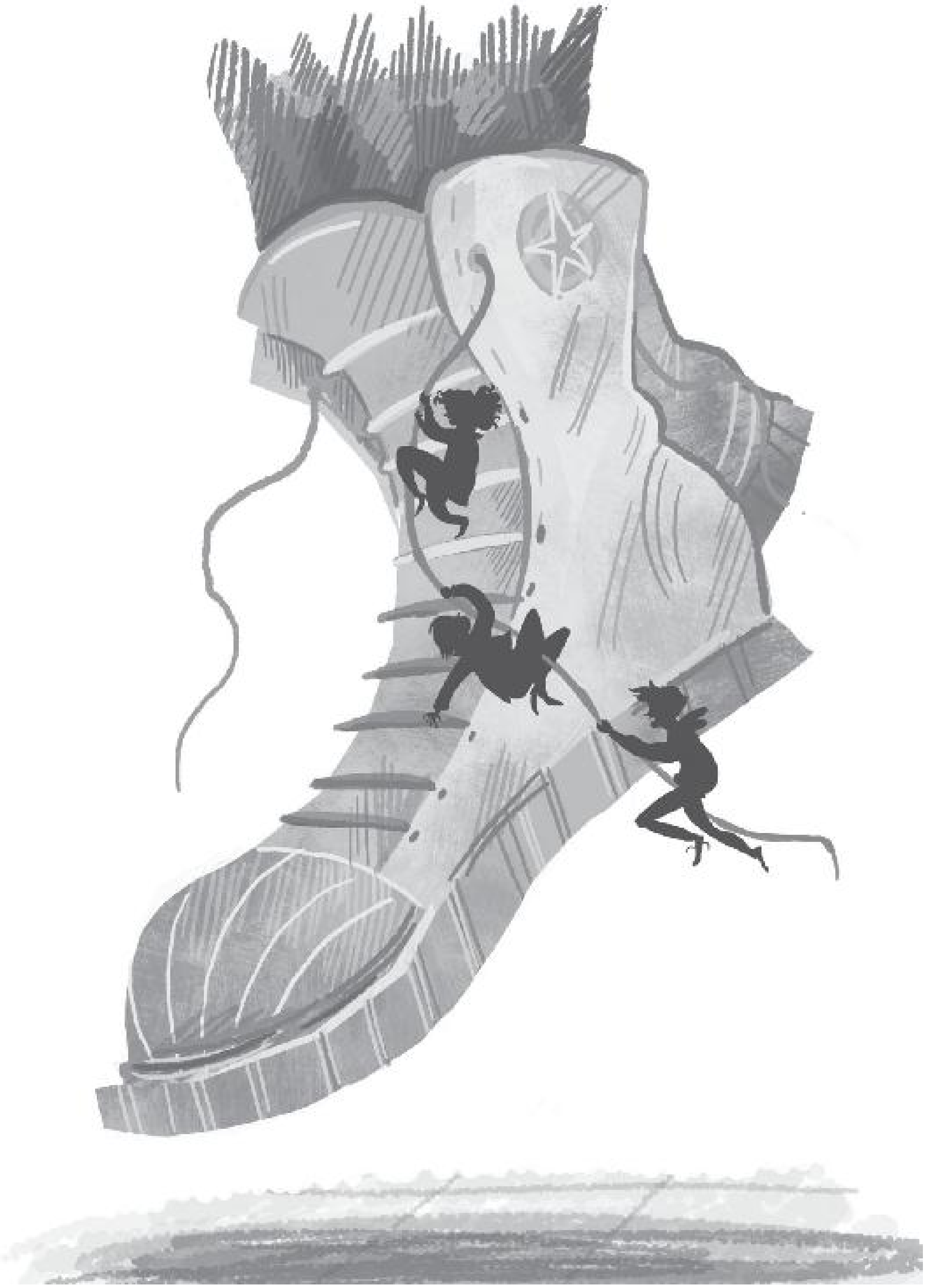
Ivy steadied her feet as a muddy cotton shoelace the width of a tree branch swung toward her. With one great leap she caught it and heaved herself up.

“I hate this idea!” Seb shouted as he made the jump behind her. The lace jerked as he and Valian grabbed hold.

Clamping her knees together to support her weight, Ivy hoisted herself higher, just like she’d once seen a tree-climber do on TV. The vibrations in the lace told her that Seb and Valian were right behind. When they all reached the top, they let go of the lace and dropped onto the surface of Johnny Hands’s floating sneaker. Although the ghoul was hovering along smoothly, every bump and tremor of the ride was magnified to them. Ivy dug her fingernails into the leather, desperate to cling on.

“I don’t feel right,” Seb said, remaining crouched. Ivy wondered whether the shrinking sensations had somehow triggered his motion sickness.

“Let’s secure ourselves under these,” she suggested, tucking her legs beneath the strung laces. “At least we won’t fall off like this.”



Once they were all fastened down, Ivy got her first real chance to consider their new dimension. It was both terrifying and exhilarating to experience the world in such detail: the wispy dust particles suspended in the air, the rough threads of Johnny Hands's stonewashed jeans, the texture of the slate tiles—

even the odors of mud and stale carpet were richer and more intense, making her nose twitch. Despite everything being brighter and louder, Ivy's eyes and ears didn't feel overwhelmed: her senses must have adjusted during her transformation.

Their ghoulish ride took them through a doorway into a brightly lit room full of uncommoners in Hobsmatch. Some were sitting at desks studying maps or examining images captured in uncommon snow globes; others were hurrying to and fro distributing feathers. The noise of their movement was so loud it sent shudders through Ivy's chest. She hoped that the three of them were too small to be seen or heard above it all.

"What do you think they're all doing?" Seb asked.

On the wall on the far side of the room hung a patchwork of pillowcase and napkin materializers, and projected onto the surface of each was a live video feed. Each one seemed to be from a different place in New York—Ivy recognized one as the view over the Brooklyn Bridge and another as Grand Central Station—but most were just ordinary street corners or public spaces somewhere in the city.

"They're not viewing sites inside Nubrook," Valian observed. "They're doing surveillance on everyone in New York—on commoners."

"And they're *all* wearing those forked arrows," Ivy added. The emblem was easy to spot once you knew what to look for—some people around them had the design embroidered onto the hem of their dress, others incorporated it into the print of their scarf; Ivy even noticed one tattooed onto someone's wrist.

As Johnny Hands glided farther into the room, Ivy caught sight of a week-old copy of the *Nubrook Observer*—an uncommon newspaper—hanging over the edge of a desk. Angling her head, she just about managed to read, upside down, the headline and start of the main story:

SEARCH FOR SOULMATES PUTS UNCOMMON WORLD AT RISK

> The number of reckless acts on common land rises dramatically as the dead attempt to become Departed. Special Branch complain of being overstretched and under-resourced.

She saw that several sections of the main article had been highlighted, but they were passing too quickly for Ivy to read what they said. Special Branch, she knew, were an elite contingent of underguards whose job it was to keep the uncommon world secret from commoners. She wondered if perhaps this place could be something to do with them.

"The search for soulmates?" Seb said. "That can't have the same meaning for uncommoners as it does in the common world, or else the article wouldn't make sense."

From the details in the subheading, Ivy could think of only one explanation. "If you're a race of the dead, your soulmate must be the uncommon object that contains the remaining fragment of your soul," she phrased carefully. She knew that occasionally when someone died, part of their essence transformed into a race of the dead while the other bit became trapped in an object, turning it uncommon. "That's why the dead are searching for their soulmates—to unite the two parts of their soul, so they can become Departed."

"Which, for some, is a lot better than floating around on Earth for eternity," Valian remarked. "Mr. Punch only revealed the truth about soulmates last spring. For the first time the dead now know that there is a way for them to finally be at peace."

"You could say the news was 'death-changing,' " Seb joked. Ivy glared at him, and his expression turned serious. "Although I've read that not all the dead want to Depart," he added.

Ivy thought of the somber-faced dead traders she'd seen wearing signs around their necks. The objects they were searching for must have been their soulmates. "That could be why Special Branch are under so much pressure," she realized. "The dead are so desperate to find their soulmates that they're carelessly appearing on common land, and Special Branch are having to cover it all up."

Johnny Hands and Curtis stopped at a table that had a large gumball machine sitting on top. It was packed with multicolored bubble-gum balls, each printed with the forked arrow insignia. Standing by the desk, a tall man with straw-blond hair was studying another copy of the newspaper. He had on a smart gray suit with a red pocket square and polished brogues—common dress.

"Agent Curtis"—the man tilted his head in greeting—"Agent Hands…"

Johnny Hands removed his jester's hat, waved it through the air and gave an old-fashioned bow; Curtis simply nodded. "A rising tide lifts all boats," they responded in unison.

The expression made Valian flinch. "A rising tide…*That's* who these people are—Tidemongers! My parents taught me about them. They're an international espionage guild."

“Are you saying they’re uncommon *spies*?” Seb asked, grinning. “That’s so cool!”

“We must be inside their Nubrook headquarters,” Valian guessed. “I expect they have secret bases all over the world.”

The word *Tidemonger* rattled around in Ivy’s head until she remembered where she’d seen it before—on a copy of a business card that Johnny Hands had given her last spring. He didn’t seem like an obvious choice for a spy; she couldn’t imagine him blending in anywhere.

The blond-haired man cleared his throat. “Agent Curtis, I understand you’ve been unable to track the assets down?”

“They took an aqua-transport to Nubrook, Commander,” she replied tersely. “It seems they are more capable than I had anticipated. Until recently, I had their whereabouts pinpointed, but they disabled my tracking device before I could make contact. To my knowledge, they’re still carrying the journal.”

The Commander inspected one of the bubble-gum balls very carefully before handing it to her. Ivy could sense it was uncommon. “Your orders are to continue searching. Those assets are more at risk from the Fallen Guild than most. Mr. Punch wants them—and the journal—safeguarded at all costs. We can’t spare the resources to help you, so you’re on your own. Updated intelligence details are inside the gum.”

“Understood, Commander.” Agent Curtis popped the gum into her mouth and started chewing.

“They’re talking about *us*!” Ivy realized, nudging her brother’s arm. “*We* are the assets. Curtis was trying to protect us, not kill us.” She felt silly now for jumping to conclusions. In fact, the last time she’d seen Mr. Punch, he *had* assured her that some of his “friends” would watch over her and Seb to keep them safe. The only thing Ivy couldn’t understand was why Mr. Punch had entrusted Amos’s journal to her if he was worried about her having it. Surely it would have been safer with him.

“Well, how were we meant to know?” Seb protested, peering into Curtis’s nostrils. “Anyway, some protection she is—she can’t find us even when we’re right under her nose!”

Dismissed, Curtis marched out of the hall, her trench coat flapping around her ankles. Then the Commander selected another of the bubble-gum balls and passed it to Johnny Hands before escorting him through a different door into a long passageway. They passed a rectangular shadow in the wall—the back of another mirror portal—before turning a corner. “The stakes could not be higher, Agent Hands," the Commander said gravely. "We need someone with your experience for this next mission."

Catching a hint of a smirk on Johnny Hands's lips, Ivy huffed. She doubted there were many Tidemongers with a record as extensive as his: he was more than five hundred years old.

"Last night, while performing a routine investigation in a building in Midtown, a couple of NYPD officers came across a group of selkies," the Commander briefed. "One of our friends at Special Branch happened to be passing and managed to save the policemen from being killed. While our friend was erasing their memories, he discovered several crooked sixpences at the scene—the selkies had been working for the Fallen Guild."

Ivy swallowed. She herself had had the unfortunate experience of encountering a selkie before—a vicious race of the dead with slimy bodies and mouths full of sharks' teeth. Those NYPD officers must have been terrified.

"Incidents like this are becoming more frequent," the Commander went on. "Having infiltrated several of their meetings, we've learned that the Fallen Guild are pledging to find anyone's soulmate in exchange for a year's service in their army. It's being rebuilt at a spectacular rate."

Ivy contemplated how many lives were in danger. The last time the Dirge's army had been in action, they had killed hundreds of uncommoners in Lundinor during the Great Battle of Twelfth Night in 1969.

"What kind of numbers are we talking?" Johnny Hands asked, chewing his gum.

"Details are sketchy, but we believe their forces are already large enough to launch an attack on any of the biggest undermarts," the Commander replied. "But what with this 'soulmates' crisis, Special Branch don't have the reserves to keep the uncommon world hidden *and* fight an army of the dead." He sighed. "If the Fallen Guild choose to strike now, it will be up to just us and the remaining underguard to stop them."

Johnny Hands winced. "Ah, I see the problem. So what do you want me to do?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ivy gripped her shoelace tighter as the Commander accompanied Johnny Hands into a room with glass cabinets down one side and a rack of costumes along the other. She skimmed the outfits as they passed: a waitress's uniform, a business suit, a construction worker's high-vis vest and hard hat—all undercover commoner disguises. Each of the outfits had a label printed with the forked arrow insignia. "That symbol's everywhere," she observed to Seb and Valian. "It has to be the Tidemongers' crest. Every guild has a special symbol of their own."

Only the lower shelves of the glass cabinets were visible from her level. They contained a range of small objects mounted on velvet trays—everything from ballpoint pens and paper clips to scissors and rubber bands.

Seb's eyes gleamed. "*Cool*…uncommon spy gadgets!"

The Commander stopped at a particular cabinet filled with soldered circuit boards, USB sticks and old CDs. "Your new mission is to locate and arrest one of the Fallen Guild's most important followers," he informed Johnny Hands, collecting a disk from the top drawer. He held it aloft, at an angle. A shaft of light appeared in the hole at the center and cast a silvery outline of Europe over the surface of the ceiling. "I understand you've already crossed paths with the boy before—Alexander Brewster?"

Ivy flinched, recognizing the name. Alexander's betrayal still tugged at her heart. He had been her friend until she'd discovered he'd used his talent for mixology—the art of combining different liquids using uncommon objects—to murder two underguards and besiege thousands of uncommoners. And now he was working for the Dirge.

"We've been tracking his movements where we can," the Commander continued. "Traces of his mixology handiwork have been removed from several Fallen Guild crime scenes. Most recently, that tunneling incident in Montroquer."

The break-in at the quartermaster's vault, Ivy remembered. Alexander Brewster must have been the thief.

As the Commander spoke, a red dot appeared on the map and started flashing. Ivy craned her neck, watching as it moved from somewhere in Russia, over to Paris, and then finally to London, leaving a faint red trail behind. It bore a striking resemblance to the weather patterns of Storm Sarah she had seen on TV that morning. "We've intercepted several encrypted messages between Alexander and the Fallen Guild. Three phrases are repeated often—*nuevo amanacer, nyt daggry* and *fajar baru.* They all mean the same thing."

"New Dawn," Johnny Hands said, rubbing his stubbly chin.

The Commander looked surprised. "I didn't know you spoke so many languages, Agent Hands."

"Ah, well it is quite impossible to live as long as I have, Commander, and not master a few dozen at least," Johnny Hands remarked. "Do you know what this 'New Dawn' is?"

"We believe it's the code name for the Fallen Guild's latest scheme. We're not sure what it involves exactly, but based on what we've been able to decipher from their communications, we understand that the Fallen Guild have tasked Alexander with finding one of the Great Uncommon Good."

Valian went rigid. "*What?*" He threw a panicked look at Ivy and Seb. "Alexander's dangerous. We know he read some of Amos's journal. What if he's hunting for the object that Rosie has?"

"Then she's in danger," Ivy replied, "and it's more important than ever that we find her. We've got to get out of here." She began assessing the moving floor—dismounting a giant floating sneaker wasn't going to be easy. But they had another problem too. "At our current size it'll take us a day just to trek to the other side of this room," she pointed out. "We need to wait for an opportunity when no one is going to see us and use the tape measure again."

Up above, the Commander bid Johnny Hands a solemn farewell before leaving him alone to gather his equipment. Johnny Hands went through each cabinet in turn, selecting different items with his pinkie extended, like he was choosing canapés at a buffet: a pencil sharpener, two champagne corks, a pair of earmuffs…

Seb withdrew the tape measure from his pocket. "I've got a plan. We slide down the laces and hide under that bin while we wait for Johnny Hands to leave"—he pointed to a large plastic container labeled RETURNS. There was a narrow gap at the bottom between the container legs and the carpet.

Suddenly, without warning, Johnny Hands made a swift about-turn, flinging Ivy's head back against the shoe leather. "He's going to go *through* the wall!" Valian shouted. "We have to jump off *now*!"

Seb yanked at the laces to loosen them and, together with Valian, scrambled to the edge of the shoe. Ivy hastened after them, trying not to imagine what death by wall-smooshing would feel like. It was only a few centimeters to the ground, but as they were the size of beetles, it looked more like five meters. She pushed her panic to the back of her mind, swung her legs over the side and slid off.

"Ahhhhh!" The plunge was so steep her bottom lost contact with the leather. She dropped through the air and hit the carpet with a *thud,* accidentally biting her tongue.

Valian managed to land on his shoulder and roll to his feet. "Everyone all right?" he checked, just as, high above them, Johnny Hands vanished through the wall.

"I think so," Ivy said, rubbing her jaw.

Seb lengthened the tape measure between his fingers. "We only have to wrap this around us to reverse its original effects. Now's our chance."

Within moments, all three of them had returned to normal size. From their new perspective the room looked completely different. Ivy noticed Curtis's boots stuffed inside the Returns bin they'd planned to hide under, so she guessed she must have visited the room before them.

"Hey, I recognize that," Seb said, inspecting a velvet tray resting on top of one of the cabinets. It contained pairs of cufflinks arranged in neat rows; one link was missing. Seb reached into his pocket to retrieve the cufflink Curtis had planted on them and held it against the single gold one in the tray. “Hmm, identical,” he murmured. “This is the cufflink we saw Curtis reading earlier.”

Before Ivy or Valian could stop him, Seb twisted it out from under its fastening. Immediately, the drone of a horn filled the air. It was deep and resonant, like an ancient war cry. Ivy clamped her hands over her ears, her ribs quaking. The lights in the room flashed as a voice bellowed over a loudspeaker: “UNKNOWN INTRUDERS DETECTED. All agents report to the Equipment Room.”

Grinning sheepishly, Seb tucked both cufflinks into his pocket. “Oops, sorry…”

Ivy glared at him. “We need to go.” They dashed out into the hallway and found the mirror portal they had passed earlier. “I can’t think of another secret to tell it,” she cried frantically.

“I’ve got one,” Seb groaned, “but I’m not going to share it with you two. Cover your ears.”

Ivy did as he asked. Despite her curiosity, she was determined to give him his privacy. If the situation had been reversed, she’d hate it if he listened in on her. Seb was staring at his feet as he spoke, and without meaning to, Ivy understood one word: *Judy.*

But there was no time to dwell on that. One by one they disappeared through the mirror and emerged inside a derelict block of toilets. Judging by the stale air and lime-scaled taps, the place hadn’t been used for ages. Ivy spotted one of the vanity mirrors returning to normal behind them; a divergent arrow was stenciled onto the corner of the glass.

“What happened?” Seb asked, taking in the cracked floor tiles and empty cubicles. “This isn’t where we were before.”

“We used a different mirror,” Valian reminded him. “They must each hide a different entrance to the Tidemongers’ base.” He went over to the only door and poked his head through the opening. “Looks like we’re in some sort of depot. It’s all clear.”

They found an unlocked fire escape and rushed out into a quiet street in Third Quarter. There was no one around.

“Do you think the Tidemongers will know it was us?” Seb asked guiltily. “That voice said ‘unknown’ intruders.”

Ivy’s head was swimming with questions. “They’re *spies*—they’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“And when they do, we’re in trouble,” Valian added. “We snuck into their base, listened to secret intelligence and stole a pair of cufflinks. We have to hope they don’t catch up with us until after we’ve found Rosie.” He stopped at a T-junction and looked up and then down the adjoining road. “I think I know where we are. The Bureau of Fair Trade isn’t too far away, but we have to be quick. It closes soon.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Valian led the way as they hurried along a deserted avenue flanked by tall, graffiti-covered buildings. Dingy alleyways with rickety fire escapes ran between them; their windows were either boarded up or broken.

Ivy shoved her gloved hands into her pockets, thinking of what they'd just learned inside the Tidemongers' base. The air was cold in this part of Nubrook, and the threat of Alexander Brewster and New Dawn only chilled her further. Worrying that they might have been pursued by Tidemongers, she extended the perimeter of her whispering senses as wide as she could. The rattling voices of broken souls trapped inside uncommon objects muttered all around, although there were far fewer than there'd been in First Quarter. There was something else at the very edge of her reach too, something *different,* only it was too far away for her to tell what it was.

"Why is the Bureau of Fair Trade all the way down here?" Seb asked. "Don't people use it that often?"

Valian shrugged. "It's more for storage than anything. Whenever two uncommoners shake hands, a record of the transaction is transmitted to the Bureau. The only time you ever really have to visit is if you're trying to settle a dispute." He scowled. "That's why I know the Lundinor Bureau so well. I once got shortchanged by…"

Ivy zoned out of what Valian was saying as a strange hissing voice soon became clear in her mind. It was one of the dead, moving closer. She listened intently as it chanted over and over, like a sorcerer casting a spell.

It was impossible to distinguish the exact words, but whereas the broken soul inside Scratch seemed innocent and full of fun, this soul felt menacing and cruel.

She scanned the vacant shop fronts, her nerves tingling. *Scratch, you there?* she asked, reaching him with her whispering.

Ivy's not something right, he warned in her head.

I know. We're being tailed, and I don't think it's a Tidemonger. Do you know what race of the dead it is?

Her satchel shuddered against her hip. *Scratch met never before.*

Valian was still rambling on, recounting his tale of being shortchanged ("…and the underguard wouldn't believe that I'd originally handed over seven grade…"), but a movement at one of the windows drew Ivy's gaze. She saw the figure of a tall man in a black suit and bowler hat silhouetted against a bright light. Ivy couldn't see much of his face, other than a wide chin and dark mustache. Was he their pursuer?

Just as she was about to warn Seb and Valian, a dozen underguard officers rounded the corner, the stomp of their heavy boots reverberating around the street.

"They've probably just come from the Bureau," Valian said, crossing to the other side of the road.

Seb steered Ivy out of their way. "Are you all right?" he asked, studying her expression. "You look distracted."

"I…" She eyed the window again, but the suited figure had vanished, just as it had disappeared from her field of sense too. "It's nothing," she reassured him. "Don't worry."

Having visited a tree house department store, a windmill workplace and a circus-tent shop in Lundinor, Ivy wasn't entirely surprised when the Bureau of Fair Trade building came into view. Shaped like an American football stadium, the oval concrete structure also had a mammoth brass funnel inserted in the roof, so it almost resembled an old-fashioned gramophone.

"The glove signals are collected through that trumpet before being processed inside," Valian explained. "The system uses all kinds of uncommon objects working together."

Having passed through the automatic front doors, they found a small reception area staffed by a mustachioed gentleman sporting a rainbow wig and feather boa. Behind him were two doors: one decorated with garlands of autumn leaves, the other with large paper lanterns painted to look like Thanksgiving turkeys.

"Welcome to the Bureau of Fair Trade," he said cheerily. "What name are you looking for?"

"Kaye," Valian replied.

The receptionist signaled to his left. "Take the turkey door to hall four. Please don't forget your headwear—it's against GUT law to use any of the record rooms without it."

"I know," Valian grumbled.

Ivy and Seb walked behind Valian as they ventured along a curved corridor with numbered doors on either side. The air smelled distinctly of peppermint. *"Headwear?"* Ivy asked.

"You can't exactly *see* glove records," Valian told her. "You have to *listen* to them. Uncommoners use certain…devices to help them do that."

As he opened door number four, a babble of chatter erupted from the space beyond. It sounded so similar to what Ivy sometimes heard with her whispering that for a moment she thought the voices belonged to broken souls. The speakers were mostly calm-toned adults, although Ivy did catch the occasional child.

"Who's that talking?" she asked.

"Glove owners!" Valian shouted back. "This way."

The large hall they'd entered was filled with thousands of crisscrossing silvery threads. Each one was strung taut between a tiny hook on the floor and another on the ceiling, giving the impression of a vast spider's lair. Valian guided Ivy and Seb through a gap in the center of the web. Ivy watched the strands quivering around them; every time one of them vibrated, a new speaker could be heard.

"They're too thin to be guitar strings," Seb observed. "What are they?"

Ivy crinkled her nose; the smell of peppermint was so strong, it gave her a strange idea. "It isn't *dental floss,* is it?"

Valian smiled. "Spot on. Glove signals pass through the floss in here before being logged in the next chamber."

When they reached the far side, they moved under an arch into a room full of floor-to-ceiling storage chests. The noise from the dental floss hall faded slightly so that they didn’t have to shout.

“Everything is stored alphabetically,” Valian said, reaching into a plastic drum mounted on the wall beside the arch. “See if you can find the right drawer.” While Seb searched for the label KAYE, Ivy watched Valian remove three cardboard egg boxes from the plastic container. A length of elastic was fixed to each one.

“Got it,” Seb announced, pointing to a spot between KAYDOP and KAYEB.

Valian pulled the correct tray out and placed it on the floor. Inside was a stack of sheet music, stapled together in batches. “Now we put these on,” he said, handing Ivy and Seb an egg box each.

Ivy flapped hers open experimentally. “*This* is the headwear?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Valian said. “You can’t choose which uncommon objects do what.” He made it sound like the phrase was something he’d been told a hundred times before. “If we want to hear who my parents last traded with, we have to use these.” He sighed and slid the egg box over his messy hair, making himself look like a toddler wearing a homemade space helmet. Ivy stopped herself from giggling by reminding herself of the serious reason they were there, and positioned her egg box on her head, stretching the elastic around her chin.

“If this isn’t a photo moment, I don’t know what is,” Seb said, laughing. “It would have been even better seeing those underguards wearing them.”

“Just put yours on,” Ivy insisted, glad that Seb’s phone was out of action—common technology didn’t work well in undermarts.

Once they had fitted their egg boxes, they all got to their knees beside the drawer. Valian inspected the first batch of music, put it aside and then spread the other sets over the floor. “The top one was mine, so I guess I was the last one to use this drawer. We need to check the rest until we find the ones belonging to my parents. There can’t be that many other Kayes.”

He studied the nearest file for a moment, shook his head and put it back in the drawer. Ivy slid a batch toward her and hesitated. She couldn’t read music and she knew that, despite all his lessons and band practice, Seb couldn’t either. Scanning the top page, she expected to find a meaningless jumble of swirly symbols, straight lines and long-tailed dots, so it wasn’t what she *saw* that surprised her; it was what she *heard.*

“…and I swear that this…,” a soft voice said in her ear.

Ivy flinched. The sound was coming from her egg box, she was sure of it. She ran her eyes farther along the notation.

"…is an honest and true…"

Every note seemed to account for a single syllable of speech. Ivy checked which elements around her were uncommon, trying to understand how they worked together. The sheet music, egg boxes and dental floss were the only items containing broken souls; somehow the combination of their three abilities enabled her to read the document.

She started from the beginning.

"My name is Cherry Kaye and I swear that this is an honest and true account of my uncommon trades."

Ivy recognized the name: it was Valian's mum. She regarded him as he sat across from her, scrutinizing another sheet. He would have known that coming to the Bureau meant he would end up listening to his parents' voices. It couldn't be often that he heard them talking, or—thanks to the Frozen Telescope—*saw* them. Today must be making him miss them more than ever. Continuing to read, Ivy listened carefully.

"Seven years ago, on the twenty-seventh of November, I exchanged objects worth four grade to a sky driver named Lucien Brown, for a ride to the shores of Breath Falls. On the twenty-fourth of November, I purchased two glasses of Hundred Punch in Lundinor for—"

"Valian, I found your mum's records," Ivy blurted. "Her last trade was on the twenty-seventh of November for transport to Breath Falls. Where's that?"

He looked up from the page. "It's a famous waterfall in the First Quarter of Nubrook. I've got my dad's records here. He hired a snow-globe photographer to take a picture of him and my mum in front of the Falls on the same day. They must have finished scouting in New York and spent an afternoon sightseeing in Nubrook before coming home—the twenty-seventh of November was the date they were murdered."

"So…if your parents were in Nubrook before they died, then it had to have been the Sands of Change they'd found, not the Sword of Wills," Seb concluded. "Amos wrote that the Sands of Change was hidden in Nubrook. I wonder how your parents had come across it."

"I have no idea," Valian admitted, "but whatever object the Sands of Change is, *that's* what Rosie has. Did Amos Stirling write anything else about it in his journal? Without knowing what it is, we can't understand what happened to Rosie."

Fetching the journal from her satchel, Ivy cringed. "There is one thing I found a few weeks back—but you're not going to like it. Amos discovered some sentences in an ancient text that mention the Sands of Change." She found the right page and, after using more of Valian's raider's tonic, read aloud:

"Light to darkness, life to death
Crystal droplet, bathed in breath
Clasped within silver hands
Deep within hide the Sands."

"Of course," groaned Seb, dragging a hand down his face. "It *had* to be a riddle."

"We need to work out what it means," Valian said, clearing everything away. "Start brainstorming."

Ivy ran through the rhyme in her head while she gave Valian a hand tidying the sheet music. Her gaze happened to fall on the notes of one of the files, and she heard a girl talking.

"…I swear that this is an honest…" The speaker had a youthful, innocent voice that reminded Ivy of Scratch. Even though the file wasn't stapled, the paper felt too thick to be a single sheet. Ivy prized away the thumb and forefinger of her glove, licked her fingertip and rubbed it against the corner of the paper: two leaves separated with a satisfying crackle. Carefully, she studied the piece from the beginning.

"My name is Rosie Kaye and I swear that this…"

"Valian—" Ivy tugged on his sleeve. "This file is your sister's."

He huffed. "Yeah, but it's empty. Rosie had only just received her uncommon gloves a few days before she went missing. She never made any trades."

"Are you sure?" Ivy asked. "There are a few notes on the next page."

Valian sidled closer, frowning. "I examined her file after she went missing. There was only the one sheet."

Ivy tilted the document toward Valian so he could see too. His eyes sped hungrily over every note—

“My name is Rosie Kaye, and I swear that this is an honest and true account of my uncommon trades.”

As the rest of the paper was blank, Ivy flipped over to the second sheet.

“Transactions in which no goods were exchanged are as follows: seven years ago, on the fifth of December, I shook hands with Mr. Rife of Forward & Rife’s Auction Company.”

The speech finished there.

“But—” Valian jabbed a fist into the floor. “Then Mr. Rife *has* seen her! He was lying to us.”

Seb shot to his feet. “We should go and confront him. He has to tell us the truth now that we’ve got evidence.”

“We can’t,” Valian argued with a shake of his head. “Not tonight, at least. The auction house will already be closed, and I have no idea where to find Mr. Rife if not there. We’ll have to wait till morning.”

—

There were no three-person road signs available when they got to the boarding zone at the nearest atrium. Seb took a seat on a SCHOOL CROSSING placard; Ivy and Valian shared the HIGHWAY 17 EXIT behind.

“I’ll start working on that riddle in Amos’s journal right away,” Ivy promised. “Scratch can help me—he’s good at puzzles.”

Valian picked at the paint on the edge of the sign, the muscles on his face tight with nerves. “We have to hurry, though,” he said. “The longer we take to figure it out, the more chance there is that Alexander will find Rosie before we do….

“And I can’t let that happen.”

CHAPTER NINE

I sit splashing my feet into a clear pool of water. The zing of freshly cut oranges fills the air. Larks dart through the blue sky as my shoulders warm in the morning sun….

Ivy forced herself awake. Bird-shaped silhouettes zigzagged across the plaster ceiling; the invigorating fragrance of citrus filled her nostrils. She pushed herself up in bed, feeling groggy.

Her room was painted mustard yellow with bold-patterned curtains hanging at the windows. All at once, the evening before rushed back to her. Valian had already organized hotel accommodation for himself, but she and Seb, having assumed their babysitter would be a commoner, hadn't planned on staying overnight in Nubrook at all. It had taken them an entire hour to locate an available room. The 1970s-themed Guesthouse Swankypants had been the first place they'd found that wasn't fully booked.

Next to her bed stood a silver lava lamp on a stylish teak table. As the wax inside it stiffened, the bird visions overhead disappeared. She read the notice beside the lamp—

DEAR GUEST,

PLEASE ENJOY THIS UNCOMMON LAVA LAMP. YOU WILL WAKE UP ENERGIZED IN THE MORNING, AND AT NIGHT YOU WILL FEEL RELAXED AND READY FOR SLEEP.

WITH COMPLIMENTS,
GUESTHOUSE SWANKYPANTS

Ivy pulled back the covers. She was wearing gingham-check pajamas embroidered with the logo of Guesthouse Swankypants—a disco-dancing woman with an afro and flared trousers. A shag-pile carpet tickled Ivy's toes as she padded into a lounge furnished with a molded plastic table and chairs in gaudy shades of orange and purple. The remains of the burgers, fries and milkshakes she and Seb had eaten last night were on a room-service trolley in the corner.

Her brother stood gazing out the window, his expression distant. “You sleep all right?”

“Yeah…surprisingly.” It crossed her mind that the uncommon lava lamp could have suppressed any nightmares she might otherwise have had about the Dirge’s army of the dead.

“I’ve been trying to work out what object the Sands of Change is,” Seb said. “If the name is a clue, it isn’t very helpful.”

She joined him at the window. Beyond the veranda, the street was busy with traders doing early morning deals on everything from feather dusters to drinking straws. On the balconies of the buildings opposite, people set off for work on flying brooms and cleaning mops. The display in the window of a shop named Tierrific Ties caught Ivy’s attention—an array of patterned ties around the necks of glittery, grinning mannequins. But as she watched their expressions changing from happy to sad, the ties changed color too.

“The riddle doesn’t make sense either,” she admitted. “I keep getting stuck on that ‘bathed in breath’ bit. It’s so odd.”

“I thought about that too.” Seb gestured to Tierrific Ties. “It could mean that the Sands of Change is something you put close to your mouth, like a tie. That would explain the ‘bathed in breath’ line, because you’d always be breathing on it.”

Gazing at the mannequins’ sparkly lips, Ivy thought about which other objects might also fit Seb’s theory. “What about drinking straws? Or sometimes people blow on their glasses before cleaning them too. Would that count?”

“Yeah, or pens and pencils—I always chew mine at school,” Seb said.

Ivy watched a man sipping a coffee as he strolled along the pavement. “There’s also teacups, chopsticks, napkins, cutlery…” She sagged. “I guess it doesn’t exactly narrow down what type of object the Sands of Change could be.” She jumped as an iridescent peacock feather suddenly appeared at the end of her nose. It floated upward and swished to and fro, writing letters in the air above her head.

Dear Ivy…

It flipped over and did a loop-the-loop. Ivy jerked her head, dodging aside.

“Who’s that from?” Seb asked, shuffling back.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I wasn’t expecting anything.”

…my warning difficulty with may

your family

cannot

“What’s wrong with it?” Ivy said. “The handwriting keeps changing.”

faster than I

must listen gates

The plume wiggled back and forth as if it was being tugged in opposite directions.

“I’ve never seen a featherlight act like this before,” Seb admitted.

The feather continued jotting disjointed phrases until, with a soft *puff*, it disappeared, leaving only three words shimmering in the air:

Yours, Mr. Punch

Half an hour later, the message was still spinning through Ivy’s head as she and Seb arrived outside the Rice Is Nice burrito van, where they’d arranged to meet Valian. Papier-mâché models of turkeys in pilgrim hats sat on the roof. Seb traded for two breakfast burritos, and he and Ivy ate them while they waited. Ivy had just swallowed her last mouthful of tortilla when she spotted Valian approaching with a girl. She had golden skin, chin-length silky black hair and a broad smile. “Judy!” Ivy’s spirits lifted as she greeted their uncommon friend. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

Judy gave Ivy a hug. “Valian said you needed some help, so I put together my most practical Hobsmatch ensemble and—here I am. What do you think?” She did a twirl, fanning out her denim skirt. She was wearing thick woolen tights, roller skates and a green satin bomber jacket. A sweep of matching green shadow on her eyelids made her wide hazel eyes pop.

“You look great,” Seb said, hastily combing his fingers through his hair. “It’s good to see you.” They exchanged an awkward smile. Ivy remembered Seb murmuring Judy’s name to the uncommon mirror at the Tidemongers’ base. Although he'd never actually admitted to liking Judy, Ivy could guess his secret.

"Valian described to me what he saw in the Frozen Telescope," Judy explained, somber now, "and everything that the three of you heard at the Tidemongers' base. It doesn't sound…good."

"That's an understatement," Seb remarked. "We have to find Rosie as soon as possible."

Judy nodded. "Valian and I have just come from the featherlight mailhouse. We wanted to find out whether Rosie could have been traveling by pram too, like Mr. Rife. So we made inquiries with both of our trade contacts, but no one's heard of an uncommon pram being sold in the last seven years. Another dead end, I'm afraid."

By the set of his jaw, Ivy could tell Valian was disappointed.

"Still," Judy continued, smiling, "you've got one lead on Mr. Rife—you know from the sheet music that he did meet Rosie, so that sounds promising. As does that riddle in Amos's journal."

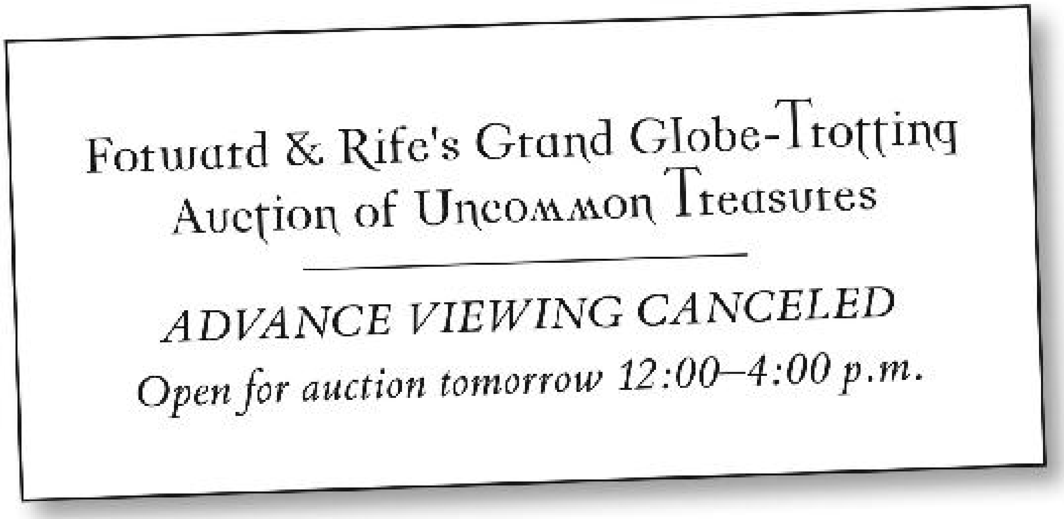
As the four of them set off in the direction of the auction house, Ivy told Valian and Judy about Mr. Punch's mysterious featherlight message. "I couldn't understand any of it," she admitted.

Valian scrunched his brow. "If there were different sets of handwriting, it almost sounds like the message was written by more than one person."

"Maybe it was," Judy commented. "Mr. Punch is a Hob, remember—his race of the dead have several broken souls trapped inside them. I only ever recognize him when he appears as quartermaster looking like a young man with a red beard, but he must have many more guises."

Ivy tried to count how many different versions of Mr. Punch she'd seen. He had appeared as an old man with a crooked back, as a softly spoken shopkeeper and as the fresh-faced quartermaster that Judy knew. His distinctive aquamarine irises were the only of his features that never changed. "I just hope he's OK," she said. "He's never acted like this before."

The streets grew busier as they walked along. It seemed that even more Thanksgiving decorations had appeared overnight—rust-colored pumpkins and gilded pinecones were now arranged on the steps leading up to most shops, and the air was starting to smell of apple pie and cinnamon. Arriving at the entrance of Forward & Rife's, they found the door to the courtyard closed. Seb grabbed the handle and gave it a yank, but it was definitely locked. He examined a note fixed to the knocker, then held it aloft for all to see.



Forward & Rife's Grand Globe-Trotting
Auction of Uncommon Treasures

ADVANCE VIEWING CANCELED
Open for auction tomorrow 12:00–4:00 p.m.

“What could be so important that Mr. Rife and Mrs. Bees have decided to shut up shop?” Ivy asked, peering up at the roof. Security guards patrolled around the edge of the garden. “It’s a pity my senses don’t reach far enough to check whether that pram is still there. If we knew it had gone, then at least we’d know they’d left Nubrook.”

“Mr. Rife wasn’t planning on visiting his buyer, Midas, until after the auction,” Valian reminded them. “Perhaps we made him nervous by asking questions about Rosie. We know he’s hiding something.” He bent down and squinted through the keyhole. “Great. They’ve got uncommon shuttlecocks inside.”

Seb jerked his head up. “Those weird things you hit when you’re playing badminton? What do they do?”

“They fly around acting like mobile security sensors,” Judy explained. “If they detect something that appears out of place, they sound an alarm.”

Ivy took a closer look. Flitting through the air as fast as dragonflies, the shuttlecocks made a whirring sound as they moved. Occasionally they hovered in one place long enough for Ivy to see how they worked—their feather skirts rotated at high speed like propellers. “So I’m guessing that means we can’t sneak inside to check if the pram’s still there or not? Or search for other clues either?”

“Unfortunately not,” Valian said. “Even if I used my boat shoes to move through the walls, one of the shuttlecocks would likely spot me.”

“What if we divert the shuttlecocks’ attention?” Seb suggested. “Anyone got anything we can use to create a distraction?” He turned out his pockets, flashing his phone, a wallet and—Ivy noted—the pair of cufflinks he’d collected the day before at the Tidemongers' base. "I've got my drumsticks too, but with the amount of noise and destruction they'd cause, we'd be bound to attract the interest of the security guards on the roof—and everyone out here as well."

Valian patted the inside pocket of his leather jacket. "Same problem with everything I'm carrying."

Ivy knew her yo-yo—which generated tornados—would cause all sorts of chaos. She contemplated asking Scratch to make a loud noise, but that would only draw the shuttlecocks' attention to her satchel.

Judy hesitated. "I can't promise this will work, but I've got an idea. Can you give me some cover?" she asked, indicating the passing crowds.

Seb and Valian positioned themselves between Judy and the street, hiding her from the wandering gazes of the passersby. Judy considered the marble wall of the auction house very carefully—running her fingers over it and studying the way it looked in her shadow before flattening herself against it. She scrunched up her nose and, gradually, her skin, hair and clothes all turned a perfectly matched shade of marble gray.

Ivy blinked, unsure how Judy was achieving the effect or even whether it was permanent. The reddish-pink of the inside of Judy's mouth appeared hovering in midair. "Can you see me?" she asked.

"Not if you don't speak," Seb said. "It's brilliant."

In a streak of color, she reappeared—still with her back flat against the wall, as she had been before.

"Judy—it's better than brilliant," Valian said. "The camouflage will fool the shuttlecocks *and* the security guards, so you'll be able to slip into Mr. Rife's office easily. We can even use the cufflinks Seb took from the Tidemongers. If you plant one of them in Mr. Rife's pram, then we'll be able to track him if he does leave Nubrook."

Ivy could hear excitement rising in Valian's voice. It was a good plan. "How did you even do that?" she asked Judy.

"Well, as you know, every race of the dead has its own strengths and weaknesses," Judy explained. "Phantoms like me have the ability to manipulate light. With a little concentration I can make something appear a different color." She tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear. "I've never actually attempted to camouflage myself before."

"You're a phantom?" Seb's face brightened. "I should have guessed sooner…you can touch the ground, but only on wheels; you're fun-loving and colorful…it makes sense now."

Ivy gave her brother a sidelong glance. All that homework he'd been doing with Scratch now made sense: he'd wanted to know more about *Judy*.

"So…where do you stand on the whole 'soulmates' thing?" he asked casually—although Ivy noticed his neck stiffen, like he was bracing himself for the answer. "From what I read, the dead community is pretty divided on the issue. Not everyone wants to be Departed."

Judy arched an eyebrow. "You've been reading about the dead?" She smiled. "Personally, I'd rather be alive if all things were possible, but as they aren't, being a phantom is as good as it's gonna get. I've got no desire to find my soulmate."

"Right…cool." Seb's posture relaxed, although his cheeks flushed as he handed Judy the cufflinks. "Good luck sneaking past the shuttlecocks."

"I'll come find you when I've hidden a cufflink in the pram," Judy told them. "You shouldn't wait around for me; time is against us." She walked over to the door and disappeared through it, leaving behind a glittering metallic outline, as if gold dust had been sprinkled in the air.

“Judy’s right,” Valian said, ignoring the goofy grin on Seb’s face. “If we can’t question Mr. Rife right now, we need to investigate another lead. Why don’t we retrace my parents’ steps on the afternoon they were in Nubrook? If we can find out *where* they found the Sands of Change, we might get an idea as to *what* it is—and solve that riddle.”

“The only trade they made that day was by Breath Falls,” Ivy reminded them. “We’ll have to start there.”

Valian stuffed a hand in his pocket and retrieved his ping-pong ball. “It’s not too far from here. We can bounce on the way.”

CHAPTER TEN

"Are you sure this is OK?" Seb asked, holding his ping-pong ball above a wooden street bench. "I'm not going to get arrested or anything?"

Valian aimed his ball at a nearby lamppost; Rosie's image appeared on it a moment later. "It's within GUT law to put up posters, as long as they're not being used to generate business." He pointed to the boarded-up windows of a shop on the other side of the road. "Look there—you see what I mean?"

Ivy picked her way through a river of traders on the way over. A sky driver swooped low over the street, hauling a woman up onto his flying vacuum cleaner. As the woman had been waving her hand in the air a moment before, Ivy guessed that that was how you hailed a ride in Nubrook.

Planks of chipboard covered the old shop fascia. They were affixed with various IUC trading announcements, several lost property notices and advance warnings of road closures. There was even a poster proclaiming the opening of Strassa, the WORLD'S FIRST SKYMART! in Tibet: *The technological capital of the uncommon world! A market hidden in the clouds of the Himalayas.* She examined the picture of Strassa. It looked like a city exploding out of the side of a mountain. Brightly colored mosaic towers rose from the rock, separated by star-shaped platforms filled with fountains and market stalls.

She pushed aside a couple of trading notices and threw her ping-pong ball at the space she'd made in between, but it rebounded unexpectedly. She had to leap to catch it before it sprang out into the crowd.

"Finished," Seb announced when Ivy returned. He was standing by his bench with a smug look on his face. Not one inch of the wood remained uncovered: he'd printed so many copies of Rosie's poster that the colors bled into one another, making the prints resemble a series of Andy Warhol portraits.

“Er—thanks,” Valian said, wincing. “Let’s move on; the waterfall’s along here.”

They continued through several wide, uncluttered streets of a beautiful district of First Quarter, where all the storefronts were decorated with ornate Art Deco moldings and stained glass. Ivy noticed more of the dead traipsing around with “soulmate” signs around their necks, and she also spotted materializers playing official underguard announcements addressing the issue: “Please remain calm,” a senior underguard officer announced in one video. “We are actively searching for ways to locate your soulmate.”

Valian found a trio of disposable red plastic ponchos in a rubbish bin and, handing one each to Ivy and Seb, he said, “Here, put these on. You’ll need them as we get closer.”

Ivy slipped the garment over her head, trying not to laugh at Seb, whose sleeves only reached his forearms. “Why do I have to wear a child’s one?” he complained, dangling his arms like a scarecrow.

Ivy smirked. “You *are* a child, Seb.”

They turned onto a terrace heaving with traders, all wearing the same red ponchos over their Hobsmatch. Many were clustered near a barrier on the far side, peering into a wall of dense mist. Ivy couldn’t see what lay beyond, but judging by the deep rumbling noise resonating in the air, she assumed it was the Falls.

Shadowing Valian, she and Seb edged through the crowd. They passed a tall man with a shaved head wearing a bib promoting Nubrook Sights. He was addressing a group of people holding uncommon snow globes. Ivy guessed they were tourists and he their tour guide, and as she moved closer she heard him saying, “…Breath Falls is one of the great wonders of the uncommon world, an entirely uncommon-made waterfall in the downtown district of First Quarter in Nubrook. The silver colossus was designed in 1934 in the Art Deco style by Vermillion Spruce, the famed Danish architect. The water draws its source from Hudson Bay and is filtered by uncommon devices before reaching Nubrook….”

When Ivy drew level with the railing, alongside Seb and Valian, the air felt cooler and full of the crisp scent of ice. Moisture settled on her cheeks. She blinked, gazing up through the spray. Looming above them was a gigantic silver statue of a man in a long cape; his head alone was the size of a block of apartments. He had sleek wavy hair and smooth round eyes like an ancient Greek figure. His hands were cupped under his chin so that the water gushing from his mouth fell over his fingers before tumbling into the foam below. The cascade was so ferocious, mist clouded around his lips like breath.

"I can see where the waterfall gets its name from!" Ivy shouted. She traced the statue down; the trunk of the man's body disappeared into the froth.

"I'm going to ask some of the local sky drivers if they've heard of this Lucien Brown who provided transport to my parents," Valian said. "You two see if you can find the photographer my dad traded with. The name of his company was Snowy Snaps."

Ivy and Seb dipped through the crowd, checking the lanyards of every person shaking an uncommon snow globe. Ivy watched one family posing for a photo in front of the barrier. She found it hard to believe that anything other than white mist would show up behind them in the picture. Their snow globe photographer was busy giving loud directions to the family to get the shot he wanted. "Madam, if you step to your right," he called, "that's it—we can frame you right between the statue's silver hands…."

Silver hands…?

Ivy recognized the phrase instantly. It gave her an idea. "Seb—" She tapped him on the arm. "The waterfall…it could be the answer to Amos's rhyme—'crystal droplet, bathed in breath, clasped within *silver hands,* deep within hide the Sands'…"

"What?" he shouted.

"The rhyme in Amos's journal," she repeated, more loudly. "'Crystal droplet' could mean water. The statue, it's got silver hands that are 'bathed in breath'…"

Seb tugged on his earlobe. "I still can't hear you."

"I can," Valian said, appearing over Ivy's shoulder. "I've had no luck with the sky drivers, but you're right about that rhyme—it *could* refer to Breath Falls. We know my parents flew down here. Perhaps they found the Sands of Change hidden nearby?"

The three of them hurried back to the railing and searched through the mist, looking for clues. Ivy scoured the colossus, but it was difficult to discern anything other than the rushing water and the statue's silver torso. A narrow pebble beach ran around the edge of the plunge pool. "There," Seb said. "Wait—is that something? I'm not sure." He pointed to the water's edge on the far bank. The shape of a building lurked in the mist.

"I'll ask the tour guide," Ivy suggested. Wearing his luminescent NUBROOK SIGHTS bib, he was easy to find, and Ivy returned in moments with the information. "It's a shop called the Old Seafarer's Place," she reported, "which opened in 1970. But it's closed now. The man who owned it sold nautical objects. It's the only shop down there."

Valian gazed suspiciously at the building. "My parents could have visited it, I suppose, looking for objects to trade. Let's check it out."

Ivy hailed a sky driver, who agreed to fly them down on his rug on the condition they paid extra if any water damage was caused. Dropping them on the shore, he anxiously inspected his dripping tassels before zooming away.

The Old Seafarer's Place was the size of a small bungalow. It had barnacle-encrusted walls, porthole windows and a green mossy roof. Slimy red plastic streamers hung from the drainpipes like the bloody entrails of a monster. "What are those?" Ivy asked.

Valian peered at them as they plodded across the shingles. "They look like decorations from the Nubrook Christmas parade. I guess the shop must have still been open last winter." Seb tried the door but it was locked.

"Good, I can't see any shuttlecocks," Valian said, pressing his face to the window. "I'll unbolt it from the other side." He bent down and retied the laces of his boat shoes with more complicated knots. Ivy could see through the hole in the heel that his socks were soaking wet. "Wait here," he said, and filling his lungs with air and pushing his shoulders back, he walked *through* the wall.

Seb gawped. "He *has* to let me try those things."

There was a clatter and the door swung open. "You might want to hold your nose," Valian told them. "It stinks like a stagnant pond in here."

Ivy covered her face with her sleeve as they stepped inside. The shop had jagged, rocky walls and was filled with rope shelving units, each stocked with a variety of sea-themed objects—from anchors and lanterns to vintage life buoys. In the corner of the room stood a driftwood desk and, behind it, a large ship's wheel fixed to the floor.

"Anyone got any ideas what we're looking for?" Seb asked.

"I don't know," Valian said. "My parents didn't buy anything in here, or else it would have shown up on their trading records. They must have just browsed. Perhaps if we look around, we'll find answers."

A voice babbled into Ivy's ear, making her twitch.

"You OK?" Valian asked.

"Just another broken soul." She scanned her surroundings. "It's this ship's wheel. It's uncommon."

"Really?" Valian ran his hands over the spokes. The wood was worn smooth in places; Ivy pondered what kind of ship it had been fixed to originally. "My parents had one of these," Valian said. "They used it to protect their scout stash."

Seb frowned. "Scout stash?"

"It's a secure place where you store any objects you're waiting to sell," Valian explained. "It was one of the places the Dirge raided on the night my parents were murdered. The ship's wheel was the key to gain entry, but only if you knew the correct combination of turns. This one must be hiding something. There might be clues in here that can help us guess the correct sequence to open it."

While Seb helped Valian search, Ivy focused her senses inside the wheel, just like she did whenever she spoke to the soul inside Scratch. Unlike the rushed gabble from Mr. Rife's pram, the voice trapped inside the ship's wheel was a slow drawl. After a minute's focus Ivy was able to understand it.

All right? the wheel asked in a sleepy Cornish accent. *Where you to?*

Ivy wasn't sure how to respond, so she decided that honesty was the best policy. *Er…my friends and I need to know your combination.*

The voice chuckled. *Can't tell you that for free.*

Would you be willing to trade? Ivy asked. They were in an undermart, after all.

*Hmm…*There was a long pause before the voice said, *'Ere, tell you what, sing me a shanty and I'll let you pass. Customers used to hum them all the time, and I miss hearing them.*

Ivy hesitated. She wasn't sure what kind of song a shanty was. "Seb, can you sing a shanty?"

He looked out from behind a set of shelves. "Say what?"

"A shanty. The soul inside the ship's wheel told me that if we sing it a shanty, it'll give us access."

Seb tilted his face lower. "There are so many things wrong with that sentence, I don't know where to begin."

"Do you know what it is or not?" she asked impatiently.

"Yeah. We learned one in music class last term. It's a traditional work song sailors sing. I could hum the tune to one, but I can't remember the words."

"So use different lyrics," Valian suggested.

Seb thought for a moment before starting to sing: "Can't take not knowing, oh, oh, oh. Give me a reason, oh, oh, oh…"

The tune was jolly and upbeat with lots of whistling. Ivy clamped her lips together so she wouldn't explode with laughter. She recognized the words Seb was using from a song by his favorite band, the Ripz. The combination of the two didn’t exactly work. Happily she turned her senses back to the voice inside the ship’s wheel.

I’ve never ’eard this one before, it remarked in a tone of surprise. *Catchy.*

Without warning, the wheel made a series of clockwise and counterclockwise turns. There was a strange groaning sound, like a heavy object being dragged over wood, and a rectangular part of the floor fell away, forming a ramp.

Seb stopped singing and walked to the edge to take a look down inside. “There’s some sort of railway under here,” he told them.

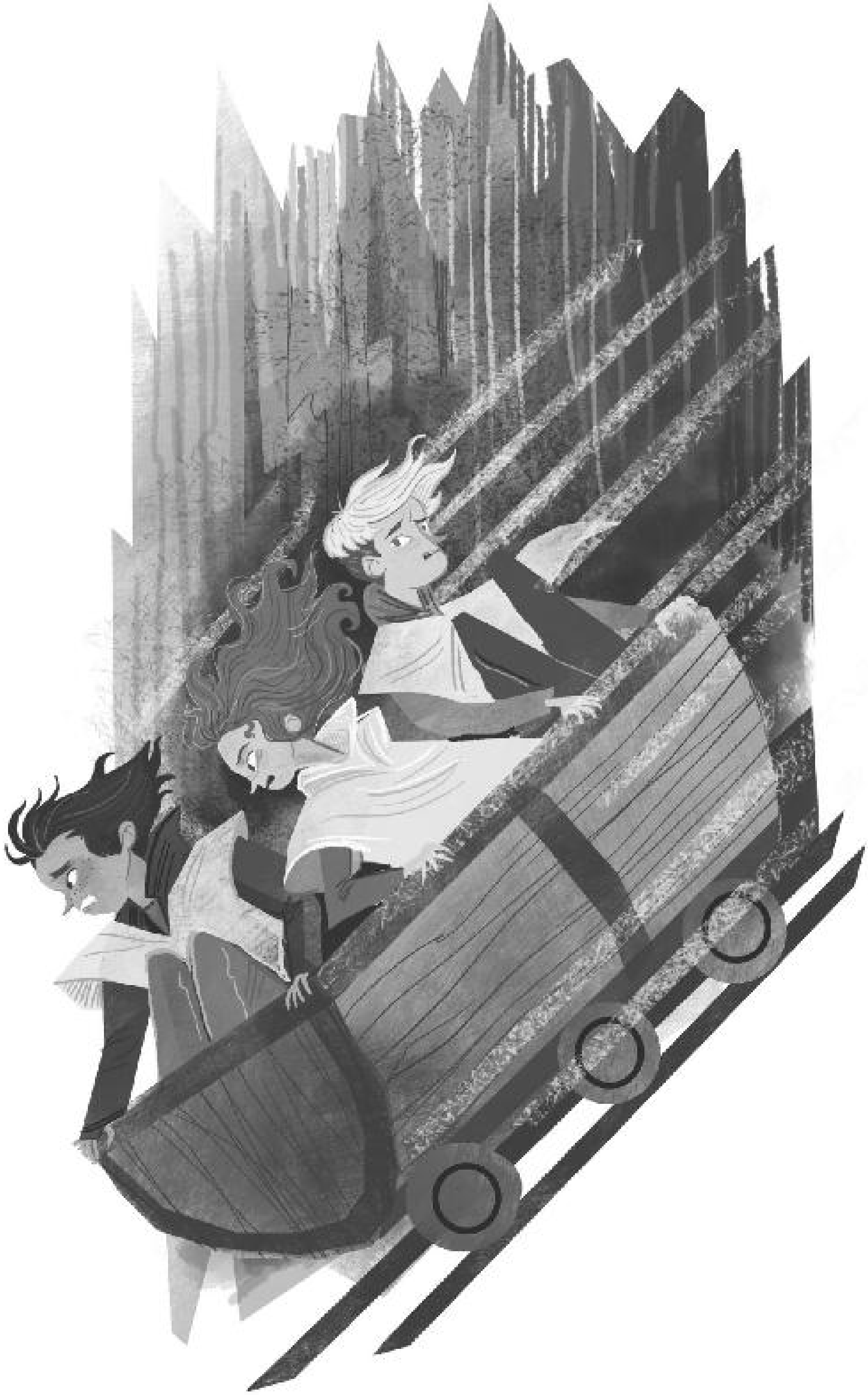
The three of them ventured down carefully. Uncommon lemon squeezers were strung along the walls of a rocky tunnel, lighting it a few hundred meters into the darkness. A cart constructed from one half of a huge barrel sat on the tracks. Valian got in.

“What are you doing?” Seb asked. “We can’t get into that thing—we don’t know where it leads.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Valian argued. “What if it takes us to where my parents found the Sands of Change?”

Ivy climbed in behind, knowing Valian was right. The interior of the barrel was fitted with three narrow benches. Moisture seeped up through her trousers as she sat down.

“Fine,” muttered Seb, pursing his lips as he lifted his leg over the side and took the rear position. “But don’t blame me if—”



The barrel shot forward over the rails. The hood of Ivy's poncho flew back. "Hold on!" she cried. Wind blasted her face as they sped along the track, twisting left and right. She could hear the waterfall rumbling in the rocks above and presumed they were somewhere beneath it. They banked left and plunged deeper, eventually coming to a halt at the end of a short passage. Where the tracks finished, a stone door was set into the rocky wall.

Seb got shakily to his feet. “Is that…?”

Ivy shuddered, recognizing the symbol carved into the door: a crooked sixpence, the guild crest of the Dirge.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ivy steadied her nerves as they ventured closer to the door. “I don’t understand. Was the shop owner working for the Dirge?”

“There’s only one way to know for sure,” Valian said. He tested the door and it creaked open.

Inside, they found a small room with brick walls. The stale air was teeming with dust, like in an attic. A chill traced Ivy’s spine. “I know this place. Six walls. Six doors. We’re in the Hexroom.”

Seb made a swift turn for the exit. “Time to be going,” he squeaked.

“Wait.” Valian grabbed his arm. “This is the secret meeting place of the Dirge. We might learn something useful.”

“Or we might be killed!” Seb insisted.

Ivy understood why he was worried: the last time they had been inside the Hexroom, they’d come face to muzzle with a vicious grim-wolf, one of the races of the dead.

Valian pointed to the floor. “I don’t think the Dirge use it anymore. Look at the dust—it’s undisturbed. No one’s been in here for ages.”

Turning on the spot, Ivy surveyed the six doors in turn. Each member of the Dirge had their code name chiseled into the bricks above: Nightshade’s door was carved from glittering rock; Wolfsbane (whom they’d vanquished last spring) had a stainless-steel door; the wooden door of Ragwort (now imprisoned in a ghoul hole) opened onto a featherlight mailhouse in Lundinor. The code names of Monkshood, Hemlock and Blackclaw cut into the brickwork above the remaining three doors.

Seb looked up at the stone door of Blackclaw, the leader of the Dirge, and shivered. “Still gives me the creeps that we’re related to that guy.”

Ivy studied the crooked sixpence carved into the surface of Blackclaw’s door. The hooded face on the coin wore a mask covering its features. That mask had once belonged to their great-grandfather Octavius Wrench, before he died in the Great Battle of Twelfth Night. She speculated whether anyone else had filled the position of Blackclaw since their great-grandfather’s death.

“Give me a hand with this,” Valian said, shoving the Hemlock door. “I just tried Ragwort’s door and it’s still unlocked, so maybe we can get this one open and discover who Hemlock is.”

Ivy tensed, knowing that Valian had always held Hemlock responsible for his parents’ murder—hemlock was one of the poisons that had been used to kill them. “Can’t you use your boat shoes?” she suggested.

He shook his head. “Not to move through uncommon doors.”

Seb joined the effort, all three of them turning their shoulders against the stone to push. After a minute of sustained struggle, they straightened up again and eased their aching shoulders. Valian kicked the wall. “It’s no use,” he complained. “It won’t budge.”

“But at least we’re a step closer to uncovering one of them,” Ivy reminded him, and she swung back the door through which they’d first entered the Hexroom. Above it, MONKSHOOD was carved into the bricks. “So the shopkeeper of the Old Seafarer’s Place isn’t just *working for* the Dirge. He *is* one of them. The dates make sense: the Dirge disappeared after the Great Battle in 1969, then this shop opened in 1970.”

Valian’s face darkened. “Monkshood must have had an important reason for crawling out from under his rock for the first time in forty years. Do you think it’s got something to do with New Dawn?”

“Maybe. Seb and I caught a glimpse of Monkshood in Lundinor last spring,” Ivy reminded him. She recalled the figure they’d seen in a long black hooded cloak. “He was trying to recruit Alexander Brewster to join the Dirge.”

“Obviously he succeeded,” Valian growled. “Anyway—my parents couldn’t have discovered this hidden place. If they had, they would have shared the information with the underguards, and Monkshood would have been arrested. We need to pick up their trail somewhere else.”

“In that case, can we *please* go now?” Seb pleaded. “I don’t want to stay in this room any longer.”

Valian gave the Hemlock door a final unsuccessful shunt before returning to the barrel-cart alongside Seb. As Ivy lifted her leg over the side of the cask, a shadow in the tunnel wall caught her attention. It looked like the opening to a small cave. She ventured closer.

Seb groaned. “*Ivy,* what are you doing?”

Ignoring him, Ivy squeezed through the gap in the rock and emerged inside a small grotto lit by the silvery glow of an uncommon milk jug. The jagged walls extended into darkness many meters above.

“It’s all right,” she called back. “It’s just an abandoned room.” Filling the floor was a single table and chair, with various papers strewn across the top. Most were too water-damaged to be legible, but a few—the ones tucked within the piles—had managed to stay dry.

Valian appeared behind her, slipping easily through the slit in the wall. “Anything interesting?”

She passed him a list of strange symbols written in black ink. It looked like some sort of code. “Remember the Commander at the Tidemongers’ base told Johnny Hands that Alexander Brewster and the Dirge were communicating in encrypted messages? Well, do you think this is one of them?”

“Possibly.” Valian scrutinized the page.

Hidden among the other papers, Ivy found a long scroll. The words *Novus Aurora* were scrawled around the outside. “ ‘Aurora’ is the name of the princess in Sleeping Beauty,” she recalled with a shiver. “My mum used to read me that fairy tale when I was little. I remember she told me the name means ‘dawn’ in Latin.”

“Then ‘novus’ must translate as ‘new,’ ” Valian said, staring at her. “This *is* something to do with New Dawn.”

With urgency, they unrolled the scroll and spread a world map over the table. Cities on every continent had been circled and numbered. “These all have major undermarts beneath them,” Valian identified. “Do you think New Dawn is a plan to attack them all with the army of the dead?”

“It can’t be,” Ivy said. “At least, not all at once. The Tidemongers’ Commander said that the Dirge’s forces were only capable of attacking *one* of the bigger undermarts, not hundreds.” She scanned the diagram, focusing on the numbers. No two were the same. “What if these numbers represent the order in which the Dirge are going to strike?” Her heart began to race as she slid her finger across the map, counting as she went. *New York is second. Moscow third. Berlin fourth…*

Her chest constricted as she pictured the undermarts beneath each city falling one by one to the Dirge’s control. She checked on London and found it inked with the number one. “Valian—they’re going to launch an assault on Lundinor *first*!”

He grabbed her hand. “We need to show this to someone, fast.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reversing along the track, the barrel-cart surfaced back inside the Old Seafarer's Place in minutes. Although the shop was quiet, the waterfall roared loudly outside.

"We have to contact the Tidemongers right away," Ivy said, leaping out of the barrel. Ordinarily she would have suggested they speak to Mr. Punch, but after his worrying message earlier, she wasn't so confident he'd be able to help. "Do either of you have any feathers?"

Seb shook his head.

"I used the last of mine to send inquiries to my trading contacts this morning," Valian replied sullenly. "We can get hold of some if we get back to the main part of Nubrook. We just need to hail a sky driver to take us up there."

"I'll go," Seb offered, striding toward the door. "I'm the tallest; they're more likely to see me waving."

As Seb disappeared into the mist outside, Ivy rolled up the Dirge's map and stuffed it into her satchel, contemplating whether they could arrange to have it ghost-couriered to the Tidemongers' base. "We should send a feather to Johnny Hands first," she decided. "Lundinor's his home." Without wanting to, she pictured the Dirge's army of the dead tearing through the cobbled streets of Lundinor, destroying shops and houses, and killing those traders who stood in their way. "Why do the Dirge have such a vendetta against that undermart in particular?"

“The one time the Dirge tried to take control of Lundinor all those years ago, they were humiliated,” Valian stated, perching on a driftwood bench in one corner of the shop. “So perhaps it’s not so much a vendetta as a need to succeed where they previously failed?”

Ivy recalled her uncommon history. In the lead-up to the Great Battle of Twelfth Night, the Dirge had committed hundreds of crimes around the world, conducting a global campaign of fearmongering. “You could be right. These last six months the Dirge have been responsible for all kinds of offenses—burglary, arson, blackmail—it’s similar to what they did before.”

“I bet that’s why they’re searching for one of the Great Uncommon Good,” Valian hissed. “The Dirge wouldn’t want to risk losing again and being made to look weak. Whichever object they’re chasing—the Sword of Wills or the Sands of Change—it might have the ability to bolster their power and ensure they win.”

Just then, several brass lanterns rattled as Seb returned through the front door. “Well, that was a waste of time,” he moaned, wiping spray from his forehead. “No one can see me through the mist. We need to draw attention to ourselves in another way—”

Suddenly the entire shop quaked, sending smaller items rolling off shelves. “What’s happening?” Ivy cried, steadying herself against a chair.

With a loud crackle, two creatures—roughly gorilla-shaped—peeled themselves off the craggy walls and dropped to the floor with a thud. Their bodies were made of jagged rocks; they had large, featureless boulders for heads. Despite having no eyes, one creature turned for Valian, the other for Seb. As they stamped their feet, sand spilled from their joints, making a horrid crunching sound.

“Gravellers,” Valian breathed. “I’ve crossed paths with one before. Run!”

Ivy dashed for the door, but a third graveller dropped from the ceiling, blocking her path. Seb drew out his drumsticks.

“Those won’t work!” Valian warned. “Gravellers are only damaged by fire.”

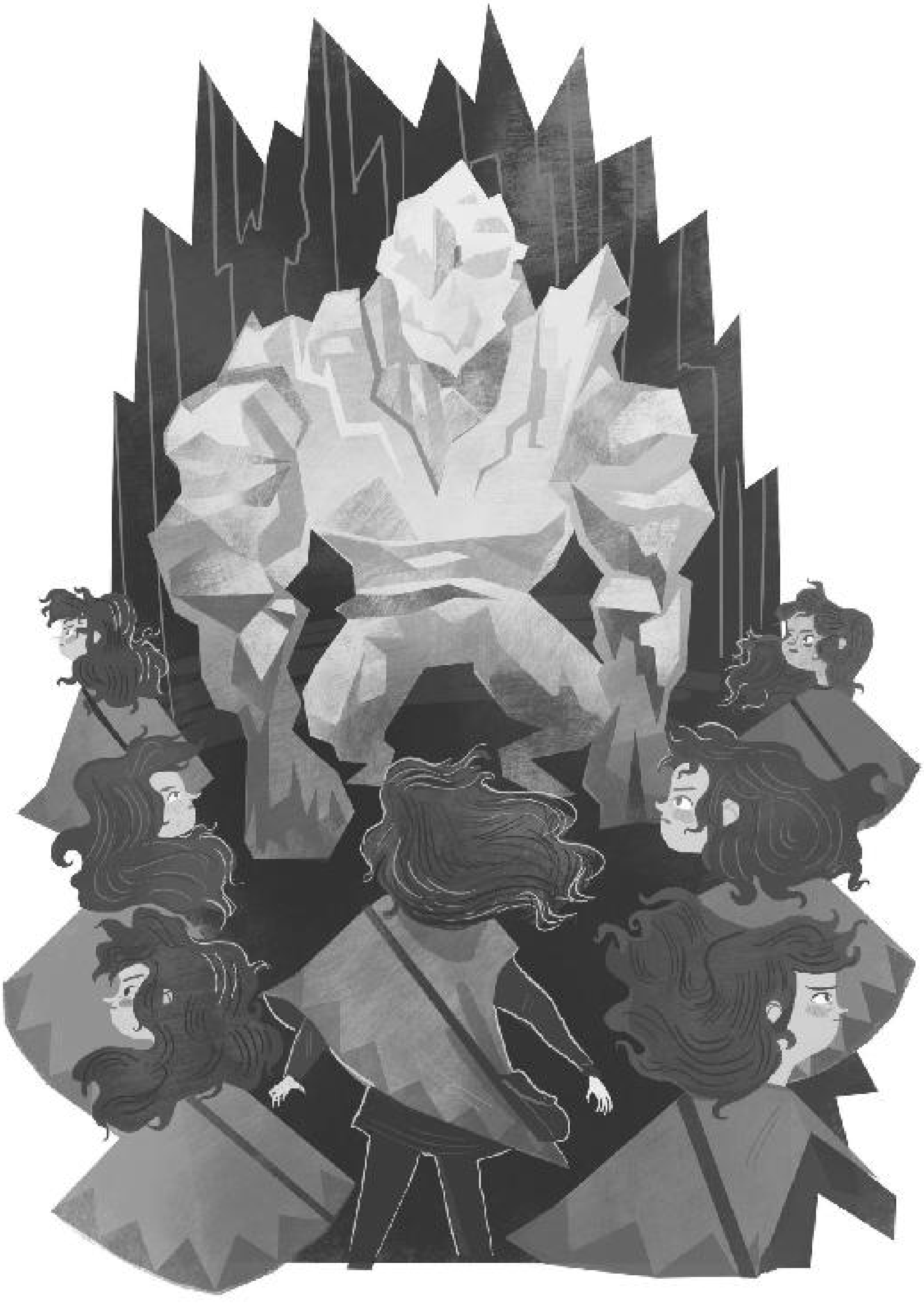
Ivy backed away as the third graveller lumbered toward her, pounding its fists together. “I don’t have anything that creates flames!” she yelled, trying to dispel a horrible vision of being ground to smithereens with a mortar and pestle.

Valian ducked behind some shelves as one of the gravellers made a swing for him. “Seb, give us an exit! I’ll try to distract them.” He took something from his pocket, but Ivy was too far away to see what it was.

Seb thrashed his drumsticks angrily in the direction of the window. Ivy dropped to the floor as glass shattered around her. But Seb’s aim must have been slightly off, because several floorboards splintered too, leaving a hole in the ground. Amid all the chaos Ivy noticed that the tunnel leading to the Hexroom had disappeared—there was only earth and concrete foundations below now.

“Everyone—get to the window!” Valian shouted. He was holding what looked like a rubber stamp in his hand, wooden with a brass handle. “I’m about to give the gravellers a whole lot more targets.”

Sand showered Ivy’s face as a graveller stomped at her head. With a yelp, she rolled aside and scrambled to her feet. “What the—?” she spluttered. The shop was unexpectedly crammed with clones of themselves: the figures looked like exact replicas of Ivy, Seb and Valian, only all facing in different directions. Ivy raised her arm; her mimics copied the movement.



The graveller pursuing Ivy dithered, turning its boulder-head left and right. It seemed confused, and Ivy saw her opportunity to escape. She hopped over a broken shelf, sidestepping the graveller’s reach, and leaped through the empty window frame. Spray from the waterfall coated her face as she sprinted across the shingles toward the water. She checked over her shoulder. Seb and Valian were following, kicking up stones as they ran. A graveller thundered out of the Old Seafarer's Place in pursuit, roaring and beating its chest.

We need a way to escape, she communicated to Scratch urgently.

He vibrated. *Soap dish beings here still.*

Yes—good idea! She jabbed a hand into her satchel and grabbed the soap dish, tickling Scratch in thanks. Skidding to a halt at the lake's edge, she placed the dish in the froth, whereupon it instantly expanded to the size of a paddleboat. "Er—get in!" she urged Seb and Valian.

"That gravel guy is still coming," Seb warned as they all jumped aboard. With a foot against the shore, Valian kicked off. A hood of bubbles sealed them in as their silver boat glided across the water. Ivy just caught sight of a graveller hopping up and down angrily on the shore before the soap dish finally submerged.

"Everyone OK?" Valian asked, brushing sand from his leather jacket.

Ivy peeled back her gloves. The heels of her hands stung where she'd grazed them, but they weren't badly bleeding.

"Still alive…," Seb grumbled, "…just."

The same robotic voice as before echoed around the vessel: *"Welcome aboard this aqua-transport vessel number 2895. What is your desired destination?"*

"Forward & Rife's auction house," Valian replied, adding, "We can get feathers near there *and* check whether Judy's seen Mr. Rife and planted that cufflink."

They rocked backward as the dish suddenly accelerated through the water. Outside, Ivy could see foam and the occasional flash of silver as they sailed by Breath Falls. The vessel shuddered as it entered a large pipe, and everything went black outside. After a moment there was a loud squealing noise, like a car breaking, and from out of nowhere bubbles surged up Ivy's nose, making her snort and shut her eyelids. "What's happening?" she gulped.

"Hold on!" Valian cried.

Something cold and heavy shoved against Ivy's side and, when she opened her eyes again, she found herself slumped under a wide stone arch.

Immediately ahead of her, a fountain spurted, set inside a small circular garden next to a busy road. The roar of a huge city filled the cold air. Next to her Valian was rubbing his ribs as he sat up; Seb appeared opposite from under a pile of leaves.

“This isn’t Forward & Rife’s,” Seb mumbled, stating the obvious.

“No,” Ivy said, staring at the skyline. “I think we’re in New York.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The late-afternoon sky was gray and getting darker. Ivy noticed clouds swirling around as if they were sizing each other up before a fight. She trod carefully between the trimmed yew hedges surrounding the fountain. Something silver glinted between the leaves. Ivy reached down and picked up the dolphin-handled soap dish and examined it.

"Anything?" Valian asked.

"Yes—there's a crack in one side. It must have gotten damaged when we were escaping the gravellers."

"That explains why we've ended up here," he told her. "Broken soap dishes will throw you out at random points on your journey, wherever the nearest water outlet is."

Seb removed his plastic poncho and brushed off the wet leaves that had stuck to his jeans. "So what do we do now? If we want to contact Johnny Hands, we have to get back to Nubrook."

"I know of one entrance beneath a disused subway platform," Valian said, collecting all three of their ponchos and stuffing them in a nearby recycling bin. "We just need to navigate our way to the nearest subway station. We'll be able to access the disused platform once we're underground."

Seb reached for his phone. "I'll find us a route," he offered. "At least we already know where we're starting from—" He pointed behind them. Flanking the stone arch were steps leading up to the veranda of an impressive building with a sloping red roof. Engraved across the balustrade in capital letters were the words:

THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
FOUNDED 1869

For the briefest of moments, Ivy wondered what it would feel like simply to be in New York on holiday. She'd love to explore the museum and see the city's other sights, just as a normal tourist.

"The nearest subway station is on the corner of Eighty-First Street and Central Park West," Seb said, tapping at the screen. "It's a five-minute walk from here. Follow me."

The noise of a crowd greeted them as they headed onto Seventy-Seventh Street. People crammed the pavements, laughing and pointing: the road was filled with a line of giant inflatables, secured under nets in preparation for the Thanksgiving parade the next day. As the road was closed in the other direction, they kept the museum building on their right and ventured along Columbus Avenue. "I'm glad we dressed warm," Ivy commented, watching her breath condense in the frosty air. "It's freezing up here."

"Minus two Celsius, according to my weather app," Seb told her. "Apparently, Storm Sarah is due to hit the city today. New Yorkers have been advised to stay inside."

"You mean the same Storm Sarah that was in London yesterday?" Ivy wasn't a meteorologist, but it seemed impossible that a storm could travel as quickly as that across the Atlantic Ocean and still be as powerful.

"Yeah," Seb said. "They're calling it a phenomenon."

Ivy remembered noticing the similarities between Storm Sarah's path across Europe and Alexander Brewster's crime trail. She hadn't given it any thought since first spotting it back at the Tidemongers' base, but now she considered whether the two might be connected. Could Alexander Brewster somehow be controlling the storm? But before she had time to share her theory with Seb and Valian, she caught the murmur of a sinister voice in her ear. It was chanting, over and over.

…The sun will rise, the night is done, what is lost will be won.

The sun will rise, the night is done, what is lost will be won….

Her skin prickled as she realized it belonged to the dead creature who had been following them the day before in Nubrook. She shook her head clear and shuffled closer to Seb and Valian. “We need to get out of here,” she said simply. *“Now.”*

Straightaway, Valian looked alert. “What’s wrong?”

Ivy scanned the road. A tall man in a black suit and bowler hat was walking steadily through the parade floats, an ebony cane swinging in his left hand. He was too far away for Ivy to see him clearly, but his face was pale with sharp cheekbones and a dark mustache. Nobody seemed to be paying him any attention; perhaps the spectators thought he was part of the show. “A strange race of the dead was tailing us yesterday,” she said. “Scratch warned me away from it. It’s here again now. We’ve got to move.”

It started to rain as they turned the corner and hurried down Eighty-First Street toward the subway station. People opened umbrellas, making it more difficult to dodge between them. Ivy sensed the dead creature behind, the voice of its broken soul growing louder. “It’s coming in this direction!” she cried.

“We’ve got to lead it away from all these commoners,” Valian decided. “Central Park’s emptying, so let’s turn off into there.”

Crossing the road, they dashed toward one of the entrances of the park. New Yorkers, seeking shelter, darted past them in the opposite direction. Inside the park, a few joggers bobbed by, some with dogs leashed to their belts scampering beside them. Men and women in business suits paced along, the steam rising from their coffee cups.

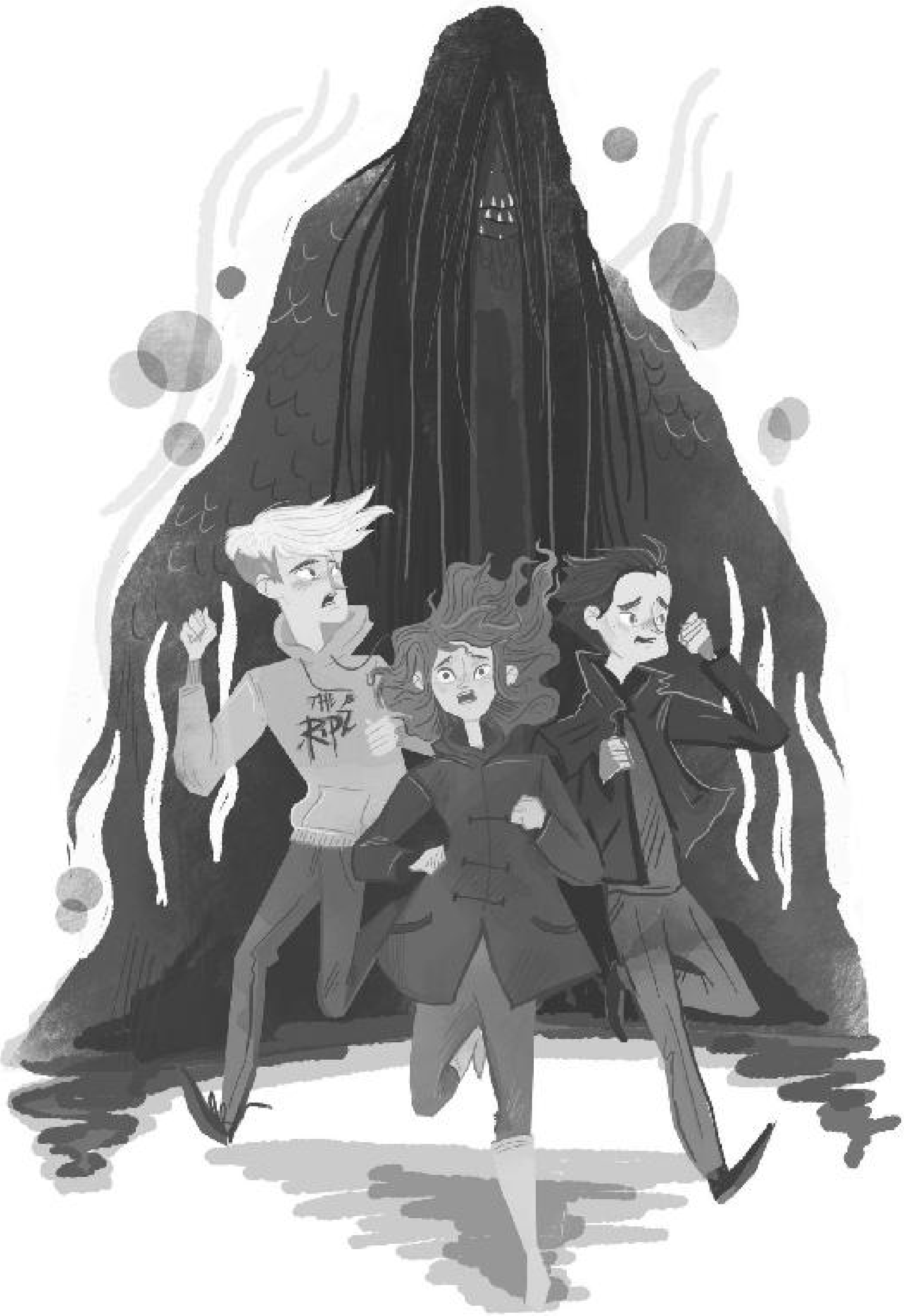
Seb, his cheeks flushed from hurrying, said accusingly, “Why didn’t you tell us about this dead creature before?”

“Because it vanished as soon as some underguard appeared,” Ivy replied. She looked over her shoulder and saw their dark-suited pursuer emerge onto the puddled path, fifty paces behind them. She couldn’t understand how he was so close when he was only walking. He stopped and tapped his cane twice on the ground. As she watched, his nose extended into a long snout, his skin grew coal-black fur and he sprouted pointed ears and a tail. His suit disappeared completely as he dropped to all fours.

“OK, now he looks like a *grim-wolf,*” Valian said. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Ivy admitted, “but he’ll be able to chase us even faster now. Run!” She swung her satchel around to her back as they broke into a sprint. Her arms pumped by her sides, her feet pounded the wet concrete. Valian and Seb raced ahead.

When Ivy looked next, the grim-wolf was no more and, in its place, stood what looked like yet another race of the dead. This one had a bulky body dripping with black slime and a head featuring two hollows for eyes. Ivy shuddered as it fixed its gaze on her and grinned, flashing a mouth of shark-like teeth.


THE
RIPZ

A selkie. Ivy had escaped one before…just.

With a loud *slurp*, the selkie dived into a puddle and disappeared. Ivy had a horrible feeling she knew what was coming next. “You two—wait!” she yelled, skidding to a halt. Seb and Valian came to a standstill just in time as the sludge-covered body of the selkie rose from the water on the path ahead. Rather than being the color of seaweed, its hairy scales were charcoal black. An acrid whiff of chemicals hit Ivy in the face, making her gag.

“Don’t move,” the selkie warned, in a voice so clear and deep it made Ivy’s ribs shake. Selkies normally sounded as if they were speaking underwater; whatever race of the dead this one was, it was nothing like any she’d encountered before. Lifting a slimy finger, the creature pointed to a trail of sludge encircling them on the pavement. Valian and Seb stumbled back as the substance fizzed and a wall of mist rose out of it, obscuring Central Park. The tarmac beneath frothed like harsh chemicals reacting.

“Acid rain selkies are by far the most useful breed to transform into,” the selkie remarked in the same sonorous tone. “Remain within the ring of acid, and we may all talk without any of you getting burned.”

They all took a nervous step toward the center. Ivy projected her senses inside Scratch. *Do you know what race of the dead this is? I know it looks like a selkie now, but it was a grim-wolf before.*

Nothings ideas, Scratch replied shakily. *Farrow knowings might; Scratch can readings Guide.*

It took Ivy a moment to realize what Scratch meant. *Farrow’s Guide* to Nubrook was still in her satchel; it contained an index of the dead. Ivy wasn’t sure how Scratch could read it inside her bag. Then again, Scratch not having a brain or eyes, she wasn’t sure how he read it at all.

Seb angled his body defensively, slipping the ends of his drumsticks out from his sleeves. “What do you want with us?” he growled.

“Only to become more acquainted,” the creature said charmingly. “We are family, after all.”

Family? Ivy racked her brains and came up with two names: Silas Wrench and Norton Wrench—Granma Sylvie’s two missing brothers. They’d both disappeared after the Great Battle of Twelfth Night. She hesitated. “Are you…one of our great-uncles?”

The creature laughed, spilling drool from its lips. “Guess again.”

She felt her satchel vibrate against her leg.

Has findings Scratch. He read from *Farrow's Guide:*

"Augrits are the only creatures able to transform into any race of the dead at will, allowing them to take advantage of their respective strengths. Although immensely powerful, they have a major weakness—they draw their power from natural light and are therefore only able to operate aboveground. Many scholars argue about their existence, claiming that it would be easier to find a fresh-smelling selkie than it would a real Augrit…."

"It is disappointing that you are having trouble working it out," the selkie muttered. "I had hoped you'd inherited my intelligence."

Ivy ignored him, trying to analyze the information from *Farrow's Guide*. If this creature was powered by natural light, they might be able to escape it if they could get underground. Squinting through the veil of acid smoke, she scanned the park. They hadn't ventured in too far; she could still make out the road. The subway station they'd been heading toward couldn't be that much farther.

"Why don't you try the generation above?" the selkie suggested. "That should narrow it down."

Ivy went cold. There was only one person he could be: "*Octavius* Wrench?" she gasped. "But—you were killed in 1969!"

"Indeed I was," Octavius Wrench agreed, with a hint of amusement. "And here I am. You could say that I've enjoyed the ultimate last laugh: the underguards I fought in the Great Battle thought they'd vanquished me, when in actual fact they had only made me stronger. It was a perfectly executed plan with a satisfying conclusion."

Seb rocked on the spot. Ivy could see him piecing together the information: this *monster* was their great-grandfather. "But—you died in a shower of uncommon bolts during the battle," he said, recalling what he and Ivy had learned last winter. "It was an accident."

"I can see *you* lack the family imagination," Octavius Wrench muttered. "Shame. Listen to me: my death was conceived in advance. With all the forbidden knowledge the Dirge have…collected over the years, effecting my transformation into my chosen race of the dead was easy: I simply had to die by revealing my darkest secret…"

“…that you’re Blackclaw,” Ivy finished, “the leader of the Dirge.” She clenched her jaw, wishing she’d considered before now the possibility that their great-grandfather had never become Departed. She looked over at Valian; his hands were curled into fists, his expression seething.

“Do you know why members of the Dirge are named after poisons?” Octavius Wrench asked them, slithering forward. “In the natural world, certain plants are poisonous to stop creatures from eating them. Animals with the intelligence to identify plants that are dangerous survive; animals that are weak or stupid will be killed. The Dirge exist to protect the uncommon world from weakness and stupidity. People like your friend Mr. Punch, or the Tidemongers I saw you visiting yesterday, are weak—they lack vision.” He bared his jagged teeth. “Muckers are the same. Their numbers need to be controlled.”

Ivy stiffened. “Muckers” was a nasty term for commoners.

“Murderer!” Valian charged forward, reaching for something in his inside pocket, but Octavius Wrench was too fast. His gloopy selkie body dissolved into a sheet of black powder, which swooped closer. Valian dropped to his knees, gasping for air.

Seb ran forward to help him.

“Wait—he’s a wraithmoth!” Ivy warned, recognizing the flakes of skin and hair within Octavius Wrench’s new dusty form. Wraithmoths were toxic up close.

Valian’s skin was turning blue-purple; his eyes rolled back inside their sockets. Seb, protecting his mouth with his arm, shuffled toward his friend, trying to reach him. “He’s choking!” he cried.

The dust shivered as Octavius Wrench spoke. “If only you could see the truth as I do: uncommoners shouldn’t scurry around underground like rats, as if we’ve got something to be ashamed of. There is no need to hide from muckers—*we* are *their* superiors.”

Valian gasped for air. Ivy squealed: “Stop it!”

“It is a pity that neither of you have the insight to join me,” Octavius Wrench continued, “I do so like to keep the Dirge in the family.” He sighed. “Still, New Dawn is coming, whether you like it or not.”

“We know you’re planning to attack all those undermarts, but you won’t win!” Ivy shouted. “Everyone will stop you.”

"Attacking undermarts?" Octavius Wrench sneered. "Oh, our ambitions are far greater than that. New Dawn will change the future of the entire planet, not just the uncommon world. Now, your friend's brain will starve of oxygen in moments unless you answer me this: where is Amos Stirling's journal?"

Ivy's fingers twitched toward her satchel, but she remained calm. "We don't know! Let Valian go."

"You're lying," Octavius Wrench snarled. "I was reading your mind as a selkie: you've seen the journal recently. Sources assure me that Mr. Punch doesn't have it anymore, and without the instructions inside it, I cannot wield the sword."

The sword?

Ivy's mouth went dry. Octavius Wrench could mean only one thing. "*That's* what you've been looking for—the Sword of Wills?"

"Of course," Octavius Wrench answered. "Only with that blade's unique powers can I forge a new path for this planet. The sword will be used to complete a series of specific tasks. Ah, but I understand your confusion." His sheet-like body crinkled, pointing in Seb's direction. "You are far more concerned with another of the great five, aren't you? The Sands of Change…"

Seb's face flashed with fear. "We don't know what you're talking about!"

"Come now, I've seen inside both your heads," Octavius Wrench teased. "A small girl with pale hair possesses the Sands…someone you care about. But who is she?"

As Valian spluttered for breath, Octavius Wrench hovered closer to Ivy and Seb. Ivy's lungs heaved as the air thinned. She stumbled back.

"If you don't tell me," he boomed, "I will kill you, family or not."

Ivy realized that the river of acid encircling them had vanished, now that Octavius Wrench wasn't a selkie anymore. Remembering that Seb had once been able to keep a wraithmoth at bay using his drumsticks, she hurriedly began to formulate a plan.

Lightning flashed overhead. Octavius Wrench tilted, as if he was peering into the sky. "Ah, Monkshood arrives and New Dawn draws closer," he muttered.

Ivy took a deep breath and shouted, “Seb—chuck me your drumsticks. Then get Valian. We need to get out of the park!” Seb hesitated for a second before hurling his drumsticks through the air. Ivy caught one in each hand and began clashing them in Octavius Wrench’s direction. At once, his powdery body ripped open with holes, but he quickly started to change form—back into the suited man with the bowler hat.

Seb had just enough time to throw Valian’s limp body over his shoulder before he and Ivy both turned and ran.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ivy heard the crackling wing beats of a pyroach. Octavius Wrench was chasing them, now as a nasty flesh-eating race of the dead—but she didn’t dare look over her shoulder. Sprinting through the freezing rain, she led Seb in the direction of the subway station they’d been aiming for earlier. Her pulse throbbed against the shoulders of her jacket.

As they approached the road, a stout figure in a long trench coat came hurtling out of the crowd toward them.

Curtis?

Their babysitter-spy had a look of grim determination on her face—her mouth drawn into a straight line, her brow lowered beneath the edge of her moss-green head scarf. “Keep going!” she shouted, turning to run alongside them. “These should slow that creature down”—she dropped what appeared to be silver safety pins in their wake—“I’ve fought pyroaches before with them. They unfold into insect traps.”

Ivy didn’t risk looking around to see how they worked in case it affected her speed. As they reached the street, they began elbowing their way through the mass of people on the pavement.

“This way,” Curtis told them. “I’ve already called for a ride.”

A yellow cab pulled up alongside them. The driver’s window lowered and Johnny Hands’s disheveled head poked out. “Get in!” he cried. He was wearing a flat cap and grubby white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows.

Seb slid Valian off his shoulder while Curtis opened the rear door, and together they propped Valian's limp body between them on the back seat. Ivy got in the front, slamming the door shut. "We need to go underground," she wheezed, peering behind them to see if Octavius Wrench was chasing after them. "Somewhere without natural light."

"There's a basement garage a few blocks away," Johnny Hands said, fiddling with the cab's sat-nav. He swiveled the steering wheel; the car made a sudden turn and sped forward.

Ivy checked on Valian. He looked pale and weak, but he was conscious. Seb fumbled for the flask of raider's tonic in Valian's jacket pocket and helped him take a sip. "Just breathe slowly. You're going to be OK."

Curtis inspected Ivy and Seb for wounds. "Are either of you injured?"

Seb shook his head while panting heavily. Ivy's heart was still going a hundred miles an hour. *Octavius Wrench is back. He's here, in New York.* She pushed off her hood and scraped the wet hair away from her face, trying to clear her head. From what Octavius Wrench had said, Ivy wasn't sure whether he already had the Sword of Wills, or soon would have. Either way, it didn't bode well. And now he knew who had the Sands of Change….

They headed along Seventy-Ninth Street before driving down a ramp into a basement car park. A car horn sounded behind, quickly followed by another. "All right, all right!" Johnny Hands depressed the accelerator. "Honestly, I'd forgotten how tedious driving is. Give me a horse, I say. Those fine beasts got me around for hundreds of years before the motorcar was invented."

Ivy noted the lighting in the garage, all of it artificial.

"Won't Octavius Wrench be able to attack us in here?" Seb fretted as they cruised around, trying to find an empty bay.

"Octavius Wrench!" Johnny Hands squeezed the steering wheel. "What on Earth do you mean?"

"He's back, and he's an Augrit now," Ivy explained, shakily. "They're powered by natural light."

Curtis scowled. "Yes. I've never crossed one before, but you're right—as long as we're underground, we should be safe."

Ivy pondered how Octavius Wrench had been able to chase them underground, through Nubrook, the day before. Perhaps it had something to do with the bright light she'd seen behind him. If that was what was helping him, she had to hope he hadn't followed them here, or their defenses would be useless.

Valian rubbed the back of his head and tried to sit up. Ivy examined his face; the color was slowly returning to his cheeks. "How do you feel?" she inquired.

"Like someone tried to strangle me," he slurred. "We were lucky to get away."

Johnny Hands snorted as he slid the cab into a parking space. "Luck had nothing to do with it. Agent Curtis had an alert put out on your aqua-transport vessel. As soon as you hit the waterways she was able to trace you. Do you know what Octavius Wrench wanted?"

"Information," Ivy said. "As a selkie, he looked inside our heads, trying to uncover what we knew about Amos Stirling's journal."

"And…?"

She fixed her gaze on Valian, her heart breaking. "I'm so sorry—he must have seen Rosie's image. He knows what she's carrying."

"What?" Valian's voice faltered.

"I don't think he's realized who she is yet," Ivy added, hopefully—though she knew it was only a matter of time before he found out.

Valian's face flooded with panic. "I've got to get out of here," he declared, and stretched across Seb's lap, reaching for the door.

"You're not going anywhere," Curtis said firmly, pushing Valian back in his seat. "It's not safe for the three of you to be going off alone anymore."

"It's not safe for anyone," Ivy said. She pulled the Dirge's map out of her satchel and thrust it at Johnny Hands. "We found this at an entrance to the Hexroom near Breath Falls. The Dirge are going to attack hundreds of undermarts, one after another."

Johnny Hands's face darkened as he examined the document. "Nevertheless, you are in more danger than you know, Ivy Sparrow." Opening the glove compartment, he withdrew a small red wooden box with a brass crank on one side. "Agent Curtis installed this uncommon jack-in-the-box in your house before she left for Nubrook on your trail. The voices inside were recorded last night."

Ivy didn't know what uncommon jack-in-the-boxes did, but, based on what Johnny Hands had said, she thought she could guess. She hesitated before turning the handle. A creaky, high-pitched tune played from somewhere within. On the final note the lid popped open to reveal a bouncing clown puppet on a spring. Its fat red lips moved as it spoke with two different voices. The first was low and grisly, making the box shudder. “You have done well to bring the Dirge *this,* but without being able to control it, we cannot initiate New Dawn. Prove your loyalty by sharing what you read inside that journal.” The voice was familiar to Ivy, but she couldn’t place it.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” whined the second, younger-sounding voice. Ivy recognized it as Alexander Brewster’s instantly. “I don’t care about your New Dawn. What does it matter if muckers know the truth or not? I want vengeance.” Then came the sound of things clattering to the floor. “Why aren’t they *here*? This is where they live.”

“This grudge of yours is a waste of your energy,” the first speaker snapped. “Your enemies will soon be scorched in the light of the New Dawn. Once we give this to Blackclaw, New Dawn can be—”

“You don’t understand!” Alexander interrupted, almost shouting now. “This won’t be over till I’ve avenged my father. I’ll tell you what I read in that stupid journal as soon as you do what you promised and help me exact revenge. *Ivy Sparrow* and her friends must pay.”

With a rattle, the puppet finished speaking. Ivy swallowed as she watched it bobbing up and down, Alexander’s last words ringing in her head.

“Perhaps I should have warned you about that bit at the end,” Johnny Hands said. “It’s a trifle personal. We know the identities of both speakers, and I’m guessing you do too. Mr. Punch told me you might be familiar with the voices of some of the members of the Dirge.”

Ivy’s skin still tingled with shock from Alexander’s threat. But she ran through the handful of occasions she’d ever heard members of the Dirge talking and realized who the first voice belonged to. “Monkshood,” she growled, remembering his gruff tone. “Both he and Alexander Brewster are at our house?”

“*Were* at your house,” Johnny Hands said with a sigh. “Alexander Brewster took a flight to New York from London, arriving here this morning. He’s been traveling on common transport to avoid detection; we had to hack commoners’ airport security to find him.” He snapped the lid of the jack-in-the-box shut and rammed it back inside the glove compartment. “Now you see why Mr. Punch is so concerned about keeping you safe.”

“But we didn’t kill Alexander’s dad,” Seb protested. “Why does he want revenge on us?”

“We were there when it happened,” Ivy said sadly, remembering the dreadful events that had taken place in Lundinor the previous spring. A blast from Alexander’s weapon—meant for Ivy—had hit his own father instead. “I guess it’s easier to hold us responsible than admit it was an accident that was his own fault.”

Johnny Hands slipped a feather out from under his cap. “I’ll let Agent Curtis explain what’s going to happen from here. I need to send a communication.” With the Dirge’s map tucked under his arm, he stepped outside. Ivy watched him walk behind a nearby car to write a message. She wondered who he was contacting and hoped it was someone who could warn every undermart on that map of the Dirge’s intentions.

Valian sat with his arms folded. “You cannot hold us here against our will. We haven’t broken any GUT laws.”

“I assure you, theft from the Tidemongers’ base *is* a crime,” Curtis insisted.

Ivy squirmed in her seat. The Tidemongers must have discovered their trip through the mirror.

“Although, in this instance, it’s more for your own security,” Curtis continued. “You heard Alexander Brewster: he’s looking for the three of you, and it’s quite possible that Monkshood is traveling with him. My orders are to bring you all back to Nubrook, where you’ll spend the night at an underguard station. Tomorrow morning, when we deem it safe, I’ll escort you to your hotels to collect your belongings.”

Valian scowled at her, but he stayed quiet. Ivy suspected he was hatching an escape plan for when they arrived back in Nubrook. Now that Octavius Wrench had seen Rosie’s image in Ivy’s and Seb’s minds, time was running out for them to find her before the Dirge did.

“While we’re aboveground,” Curtis continued, addressing Ivy and Seb, “the three of us need to video-call your parents, to reassure them that everything’s OK. It’s eight-thirty p.m. in London right now. I’ve told them we were going to the cinema this evening, so they’ll think we’re in the back of a taxi on our way home.” She squinted at the rain-smeared windows, blurring the car park outside. “If we all play along, they won’t suspect a thing.”

Ivy contemplated being uncooperative, but she decided it would be better to participate in Curtis’s ploy. She and Seb couldn’t leave Valian, so smoothing things over at home would allow them to remain in Nubrook by his side without fear of their parents’ worrying.

Curtis took a mobile phone out of her coat pocket; it was so new it still had the protective film covering the case. She held down the power button and studied the screen carefully as the light came on. Judging by the lines of concentration on Curtis’s face, Ivy guessed she didn’t use common technology all that frequently.

“Hmm…” Curtis muttered. “The device is having difficulty getting reception.” She waved it around, growing more and more frustrated.

“It’s probably because we’re underground,” Seb told her. “You might get a signal somewhere else in the garage.”

“Yes, you could be right,” Curtis agreed. She opened the door. “Stay here,” she growled. “I’ll be watching the car. If any of you move, I’ll know.”

As soon as she’d left the vehicle, Ivy lowered her voice. “Valian, I’m so sorry.” Her stomach twisted with regret, wishing she could turn back time and undo their encounter with Octavius Wrench. “The Dirge were never looking for the Sands of Change at all, but they will be now. I should have realized sooner what Octavius was up to.”

“You’re not to blame,” Valian said firmly. “Mr. Rife is our last chance now. We have to focus on finding him and hope he’ll tell us something that can lead us to Rosie.”

Ivy wondered if Judy had managed to plant that cufflink in Mr. Rife’s pram. If she had, they’d be able to trace Mr. Rife’s location and catch up with him. She made a mental note to send Judy a message about it as soon as they were back in Nubrook.

“Did anyone else think it was weird,” Seb asked, “what Octavius Wrench said when that lightning struck? It was like he knew straightaway that Monkshood had arrived in New York, as if the storm was a signal.”

Ivy shared her theory with them about Storm Sarah being uncommon. “It started in Paris, four days ago,” she explained, “right when Alexander broke into that vault in Montroquer. Now the storm is here, and so are Alexander and Monkshood. Perhaps whatever they stole from that vault generated the storm? Although…I can’t see why they’d want to do that.”

“The only uncommon object I know that can affect the weather is a bag,” Valian said. “And that’s only when thousands of them are used to travel to the same place all at once.”

Gazing at the raindrops on the front windshield, Ivy remembered something she’d been taught at school. “Rain and wind are only ever caused by a change in temperature in the atmosphere. Is there something uncommon that can manipulate that?”

“What about a knife like the one I used to alter the state of water?” Seb suggested. “Mr. Rife said that uncommon blades all do the same thing—they control forces.”

Blades…

Ivy’s mouth went dry as understanding crept through her. “The Sword of Wills! *That’s* what Alexander stole! We know the sword was hidden in Montroquer…and Octavius Wrench told us he’s going to use it to begin New Dawn…so Alexander and Monkshood must be bringing it to him.”

“Whatever they’re planning to do with it,” Seb muttered, “it’s gotta be a lot worse than a bit of thunder and lightning. Mr. Rife said that the higher the grade of the blade, the greater the number of forces it can control, so I guess there’s no limit to the things the Sword of Wills can manipulate—the laws of physics, emotions…people’s minds?”

Ivy considered what the Dirge might be plotting. Octavius Wrench had said that he was going to use the sword’s “unique powers” for a series of tasks. She replayed the jack-in-the-box conversation in her head and had a sinking feeling it was something to do with what Alexander had said about “muckers” knowing the truth. “Remember what Monkshood said: the Dirge can’t wield the sword without Amos’s instructions.” She clasped her satchel firmly. “That means we have to keep the journal protected at all costs. Maybe we should go along with Curtis after all?”

There was a loud *click* and the car door flew open. “Quick, get into position,” Curtis said, shuffling in. “It’s ringing.”

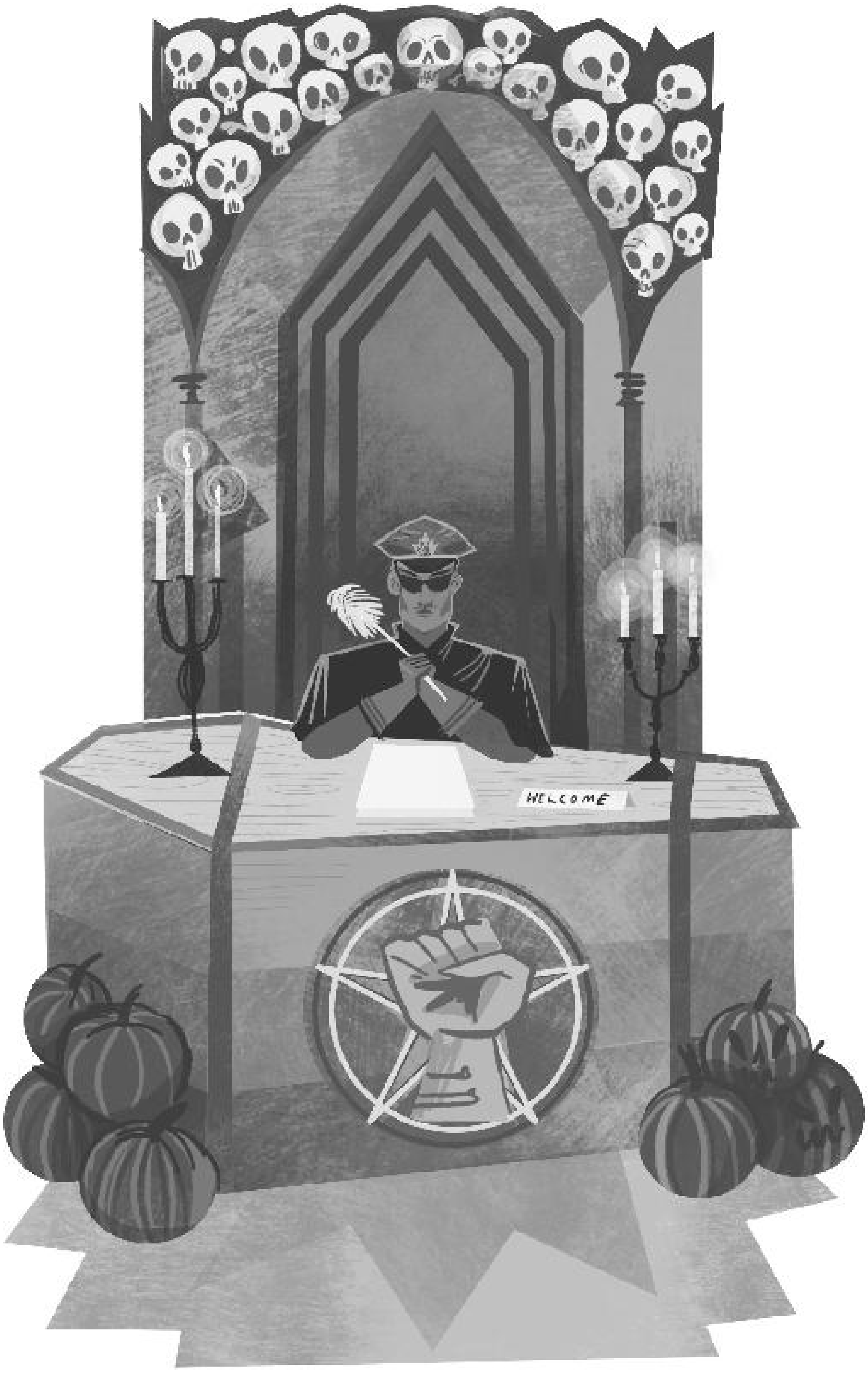
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next morning, after complying with the Tidemongers' protection scheme, Ivy sat tapping her feet against the polished ebony floor of the underguard station. The windowless waiting room was a lot bigger than the one in Lundinor but featured comparably creepy décor: pumpkins with carved screaming faces adorned the flint gray walls, and uncommon lime squeezers spilled eerie green light over the ceiling. Officers in navy blue uniforms peered out from behind the main desk, which was constructed from three lacquered coffins stacked on top of each other. If it wasn't late November, Ivy would have thought they were getting ready to celebrate Halloween.

"I cannot believe they put us in the cells overnight," Seb growled, folding his arms. "I had to sleep on a bench made out of an old gravestone with a blanket that only came up to my knees."

Valian huffed. "At least you had fresh air. I was sharing with a sootsprite named Claude who had a serious wind issue." He scrunched up his nose and shuddered, as if revisiting the experience.

For Ivy, the hard bed and small blanket had been the least of her problems. Without the lava lamp at Guesthouse Swankypants to soothe her to sleep, she'd been haunted by nightmares about the Dirge's army of the dead. At one point, she'd dreamed of Octavius Wrench rising from the bowels of the earth as a giant—his bowler hat as big as a football stadium—stomping around the planet, gobbling up undermarts. It made her shiver just thinking about it.


WELCOME

Over by the main entrance, Ivy spotted Judy skating through the automatic doors. A pair of underguard officers stopped her before she could come any closer. With the handles of their toilet brushes resting over their shoulders, they looked like soldiers holding bayonet rifles. They grumbled a few words, and Judy shook hands with them. Finally she was allowed to pass.

"I can't stay long," Judy whispered as she reached them and took a seat opposite. "Visiting time is half an hour, apparently."

"This is ridiculous," Seb muttered. "You'd think *we* were the criminals."

"Did you manage to plant one of the cufflinks in Mr. Rife's pram?" Ivy asked.

Judy patted the pocket of her patchwork waistcoat. She was wearing a new Hobsmatch combo with her roller skates—a tutu, tiger-stripe leotard and ankle warmers. Her hair was braided away from her face, so her cheekbones looked even more prominent. "I've got the other one safe here. I'll keep checking the coordinates to see if anything changes."

Ivy caught Seb staring at her and gave him a subtle elbow.

"Mr. Rife didn't set foot in the building all day yesterday," Judy continued. "But while I was sneaking around, I found something interesting in one of his cardboard boxes. Hidden beneath a collection of *Farrow's Guides* was a whole pile of old newspaper articles about the murder of Valian's parents."

"Old?" Ivy's brow crinkled. "You mean—he'd had them for a while?"

"So he must have known exactly who I was when I walked into his office," Valian said angrily.

Judy checked the skull-clock on the wall. "The auction house opens in two hours, at midday. I'll go straight there from here. You three need to figure out a way of breaking out so you can come and join me."

Over her shoulder, Ivy noticed an underguard officer escorting a prisoner through a black door labeled DISCOCOMMUNICATOR. "What's through there?" she asked Valian, knowing he'd seen the inside of many underguard stations. "I've never heard of a discommunicator before."

He turned to look. "You're reading it wrong," he corrected her. "There's an extra 'co' in the middle: it says '*disco*communicator.' Every underguard station has one. It's a device that allows you to send live images to and from anywhere on the planet."

"Like an uncommon video call?"

"It's a bit better than Curtis's phone," Valian replied with a smirk. "Discocommunicators can transmit light, sound, aroma and taste; and they work thousands of miles underground. They’re used exclusively by underguards to give them more powers during an emergency.”

Like the flashing blue light on an ambulance, Ivy thought. Underguards were also permitted to use uncommon body bags inside undermarts when, for everyone else, bag travel was forbidden; she guessed this device had a similar purpose.

“This discocommunicator…,” Ivy continued, “…if it’s that powerful, do you think we could use it to contact Mr. Punch? I’m worried that his featherlight yesterday contained an important message and we haven’t worked out what it is.”

Judy’s expression darkened. “That might be a good idea. I wrote to him this morning, asking if he knew any more about Mr. Rife. I’ve had no reply yet.”

“They won’t just let us use it,” Valian said, considering the black door. “We’ll need a distraction before sneaking in.”

The four of them huddled closer, making a plan. Ivy observed the flow of people in and out of the discocommunicator room. As soon as it was empty, Seb and Judy stood up and went over to the coffin desk. A pair of stern-faced male underguards sat behind it.

“Ooh…er…I’m not feeling well,” Seb slurred, holding his tummy. He convulsed just enough to make the performance realistic. Ivy wasn’t surprised how convincing he could be; he’d had enough practice at it, after all. One of the guards—a young man with dark hair and glasses—looked up and startled. Seb’s face was pea-soup green. Ivy could tell by the set of Judy’s jaw that she was concentrating hard to achieve the effect. “I think it might have been a dodgy burrito,” she explained, rubbing Seb’s back. “Can you call your medical officer, please?”

The officer exchanged a suspicious glance with his colleague.

“Please?” Judy begged. “I don’t want your lovely clean reception area to be spoiled.”

The young man wrinkled his nose. “Wait here,” he said, and he rose from his seat and disappeared through a door at the back.

Ivy and Valian hopped a few chairs closer to the discocommunicator door.

Seb leaned over the coffin desk. “Urgh…,” he gurgled, approaching puke mode, “I can feel it coming.”

“There, there,” Judy soothed. “Perhaps we can find a bag?”

The remaining officer leaped from his chair and yanked open the rear door. “Frank!” he yelled. “Hurry!”

While his back was turned, Ivy and Valian shot to the door of the discocommunicator room and, using Valian's boat shoes, unlocked it from the inside. The room was circular with a slanted floor that dipped in the center. Rows of benches ran around the perimeter; in the middle a glittering disco ball was suspended from a wire in the ceiling. *That explains the name*, Ivy thought. She was surprised Guesthouse Swankypants hadn't acquired one.

A steel truss rigged with various stage lights and spots stood on one side. Valian fiddled with the controls on a few of them, and the room filled with tiny squares of light. "I once tried to use one of these to speak to Rosie, but it can't dial people; only places," he clarified. He pressed a button to start the ball rotating and the lights began sweeping across the walls. "I've set it up to give us a direct view into Mr. Punch's Curiosity Shop. If he's not there, we'll have to try a few other spots in Lundinor."

A hot-tub-sized circular hologram sputtered into life above the mirror ball. It showed a room with curved gray stone walls and narrow slits for windows. Outside it, Ivy caught glimpses of castle turrets and battlements made from the same smooth, square stone blocks. The floor was dotted with various trunks, crates and cases, all stamped with Mr. Punch's logo: a black top hat. Valian was right about the discocommunicator being able to transmit smells, because the scent of rain lined Ivy's nose.

"This is it?" she said, surprised. The last time she'd seen Mr. Punch's shop it had looked like a giant purple tent. Before that, it had been a brick-built shop with leaded windows.

"The Stone of Dreams is in the corner, over there," Valian whispered, pointing to a gray plinth carved with winged horses and five-pointed stars. A battered copy of *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* by Roger Lancelyn Green lay open on top.

Ivy was familiar enough with the fairy tale to know that it was set in medieval England. "That explains the castle," she muttered, knowing that the Stone of Dreams had the extraordinary power to manifest certain aspects of whichever book rested on its surface. Mr. Punch used it to change the appearance of Lundinor every trading season; Ivy was curious to see what the rest of the undermart looked like.

As she and Valian waited, a tall man dressed in a black tuxedo strode into the room. The short fuzz of brown hair on his scalp was the same length as that on his chin. "Mr. Punch," Ivy said quietly. "He might not be wearing his usual Hobsmatch, but it's definitely him." She could tell because, as she watched, his appearance kept shifting—a phenomenon she was able to perceive using her whispering. First he was slim with freckles and a dimpled chin; then he was short and hunched with a wrinkled face and white hair. She'd only seen him change this quickly when he'd been under extreme pressure. She wasn't sure what Valian could see.

When the red-bearded quartermaster took shape, he turned to face them. "Ivy? Valian?" He squinted toward what Ivy presumed must be a hologram of herself and Valian in the castle tower.

Before they could respond, however, Mr. Punch altered into a beefy-looking man with a stubbly beard, who grunted, "Why are we talking to them?"

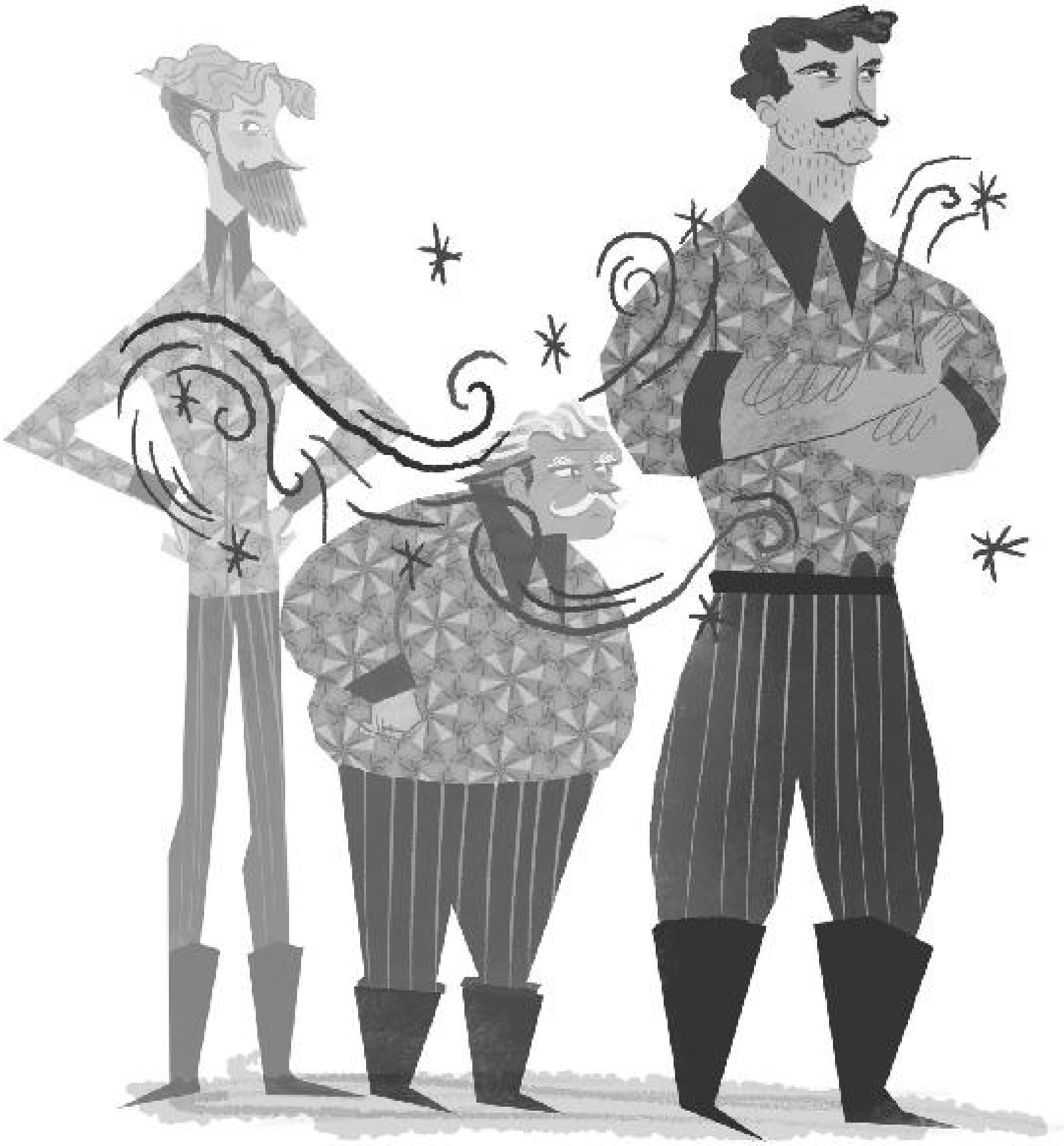
"This is a waste of time," said the next guise—a smartly dressed gentleman with a cravat. He had a well-spoken voice. "I don't see how we can make progress."

Ivy double-checked, but there was no one else in the room. Mr. Punch was talking to himself…if you could call it that. "Are you OK, sir?" she asked. In all her experiences with him, he'd still only ever felt to her like one person.

"Let me find my soulmate and become Departed, and this won't be an issue!" demanded another guise.

"That could destroy us," the next pointed out. "I, for one, vote we don't risk it. Some of us want to stay around."

"*Some of us* shouldn't have kept the knowledge of soulmates from others," one of them stated bitterly.



Ivy understood from the snippets of conversation why they were arguing. Some of the souls within Mr. Punch wanted to be reunited with their soulmates so they could become Departed, while others didn’t. It sounded like they weren’t even sure what would happen if one of them did depart. Perhaps the conflict between them explained the strange featherlight Mr. Punch had sent Ivy, the one that had looked like it had been written by multiple people.

“Mr. Punch, sir? Can you hear or see us?” Valian asked.

The quartermaster appeared again. His top hat sat off-kilter, his red beard was ruffled and there were dark circles under his swirly green-blue eyes. “I don’t have long,” he warned. “At the moment, it takes a lot of persuasion for my other friends to allow me to talk to you.”

Ivy imagined what it might be like to share her body with several broken souls. You would all have to compromise with one another in order for one of you to assume control. It would need to be a relationship based on trust and understanding.

Valian asked hurriedly, "Do you know anything about Mr. Rife? Why did you give me the invitation to the auction house?"

"For the same reason I gave Amos Stirling's journal to Ivy. Because fate decided you should have it." He looked over his shoulder, as if expecting someone to sneak up behind him. "A powerful uncommon clock foretold to me that you and Mr. Rife would meet. The invitation was to point you in the right direction."

Valian gritted his teeth. "Mr. Rife lied to us. We know he shook hands with Rosie on the day she went missing, but he said he'd never seen her before."

"He is not your enemy," Mr. Punch said firmly. "The vision I had was of you two embracing as friends."

"That doesn't make sense," Valian said. "I don't even know him."

"I received another premonition yesterday morning," Mr. Punch continued, urgently. "I sent you a featherlight to explain—" His words were cut short as his face widened into that of the beefy man with the stubbly chin. Before *he* could say anything, the quartermaster returned for a split second. "It was a warning—"

Ivy grew more and more frustrated as the quartermaster continued to vanish and then reappear briefly, struggling against his colleagues. On each occasion he managed to utter a single word or short phrase.

"…Great Gates…Blackheath…using the sword…commoners in danger," Valian repeated. "The sword must be the Sword of Wills; and Lundinor lies under Blackheath in London. Any idea what the rest of it could mean?"

"It's got to be something to do with New Dawn," Ivy decided. "Perhaps that's what Mr. Punch saw a prophecy about; he said it was a warning."

Valian shivered. "'Commoners in danger'…That would fit with all that rubbish Octavius Wrench said in Central Park—about commoners being inferior and their numbers needing to be controlled."

The door behind them thudded open. Ivy spun around to see a red-faced underguard officer standing in the opening. "Out," he barked. "NOW!" He flicked a switch on the wall and the disco ball began to slow down.

"No, wait!" Ivy studied the flickering hologram, trying to capture every detail. Just before the transmission died, Mr. Punch appeared as the red-bearded quartermaster one last time. Ivy tensed as he uttered two final words:

“…attack London.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Six heavily armed underguard officers escorted Ivy, Seb and Valian along the road toward Guesthouse Swankypants. Ivy caught the nervous expressions of traders peering at them through shop windows. With everyone watching, it wasn't going to be easy to slip away.

"I'm very disappointed," Curtis said, stomping behind them. "I had assumed, given the seriousness of your situation, that you'd conduct yourselves properly."

As Curtis continued to scold them, Ivy reached for Scratch with her whispering. *Mr. Punch saw a prediction about New Dawn in the face of an uncommon clock*, she told him. *The Dirge are going to attack London.*

Her satchel trembled. *But what Dirge stoppings can we do?* Scratch replied.

I don't know. Ivy's mind was racing. She remembered Octavius Wrench boasting that the Dirge had far greater ambitions than attacking undermarts. Now that she thought about it, the Dirge's map hadn't actually shown any undermarts on it at all…perhaps it was the common cities above them that were the real targets.

Scratch beings scared, he said in a little voice.

Me too, Ivy admitted.

The lobby of Guesthouse Swankypants fell silent as they all marched in. A cleaner looked up from polishing the marble floor only to leap up from his knees and scamper away. A similarly quick exit was made by a porter tidying a vase of orchids. One of the underguard officers went over to reception; the others waited for instructions.

"Their suite is on the second floor," Curtis told them. "I'll need you covering the windows, doors and fire exits. Nobody goes in or out until we've left." The officers promptly dispersed. One went outside, while another stationed herself by the front door; the remaining three ran to the stairwell.

Curtis guided Ivy, Seb and Valian to the central elevator. "You'll have fifteen minutes to get packed. Take everything you need; we're not coming back."

"Why the rush?" Seb asked, checking his watch. He stared pointedly at Ivy and Valian. "It's only just *midday*."

Ivy tensed. The auction house had opened; they needed to get there fast.

"No more questions," Curtis said dismissively. "Just do as I say." When they got out of the elevator, she marched them along the corridor and paused outside their room. "I'll be stationed here, covering the hallway. Your time starts *now*."

Ivy swiped her glove against the door handle; it buzzed loudly before opening, and the three of them stepped inside. As Valian shut the door behind them, Ivy saw immediately that something was amiss: fragments of colored glass lay scattered across the thick carpet, cabinet drawers hung open and curtains had been ripped down. She spotted her pajamas hiding under the upturned coffee table. Someone had been in and ransacked the place.

A rustling noise sounded in one of the bedrooms. Seb reached for his drumsticks.

"Wait," Ivy whispered, pulling him back. "Shouldn't we get Curtis?"

"Not till we're sure we need her," Valian hissed. "This might be the only chance we get to escape."

They crept toward the bedrooms; the door to Ivy's was ajar. Valian put a finger to his lips and signaled for Ivy and Seb to get back.

"Who's there?" he shouted. There was no reply, but the rustling stopped. Valian nodded at Ivy and Seb, and then burst in, and they hurried after him.

Ivy stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Alexander Brewster standing at the foot of her bed. In one hand he held a test tube filled with transparent liquid. In the other was a small round tin painted with a geometric pattern; a steel handle protruded from the top of it.

“Alexander—” She lost her breath.

His Hobsmatch—a simple shirt and trousers—were baggier than before, and his skin and fiery-red hair were dirtied with oil and blood. He blinked once, then, with a menacing grin, smashed the test tube on the floor. As Ivy, Seb and Valian shuffled back to avoid the spillage and shards of glass, Alexander rotated the handle on the colorful tin. It emitted a high-pitched, tinkling tune that made the hair on Ivy’s neck stand on end. Worse, at the sound of the music, the puddle at her feet crystallized with a loud crackle, and tiny spores of chalky powder began lifting from its surface.

The air turned cloudy. A dry chemical coated the roof of Ivy's mouth, reeking of plaster. She heard Seb coughing, but when she tried to reach for him, her arms wouldn't budge. Her limbs felt numb, as if the flow of blood had been cut off. As the room cleared, she saw that Seb and Valian were having the same problem: their bodies had ground to a stony halt, like robots drained of battery power. Ivy wanted to shout to them, but her mouth was frozen shut.

Alexander snorted with laughter. "Brilliant!" he cried gleefully. He was clutching the tin music box in his hand. "You look ridiculous!"

Terror squeezed at Ivy's chest, but she breathed through her nose, trying not to panic. Her internal organs seemed to be functioning fine: it was just the rest of her body that felt like wet clay.

"I've named this formula 'Statue Salt,'" Alexander announced boastfully. "After much experimentation, I discovered that the tune from an uncommon music box activates the liquid, which solidifies into a powder that invades people's lungs. The genius thing is that the paralysis is instantly reversed if you listen to an uncommon music box played backward—and as I've already heard this one in reverse, I'm immune!" He tucked the music box inside a battered leather doctor's bag, which lay open on the bed. Inside, Ivy could see test tubes containing various substances, some with what looked like more of the same transparent fluid. One was labeled DAYLIGHT BURST, and below it was scribbled *Blackclaw.* Ivy guessed Octavius Wrench had made use of that particular potion in order to briefly appear in Nubrook two days ago.

When he turned around again, Alexander was still smiling smugly. Ivy growled at him—her vocal cords were still working, it was just that she couldn't get any words out—and the joy dissolved from Alexander's face. "You're back earlier than I anticipated," he snapped. "You can wait there while I continue searching." From the state of the bedroom, Ivy reckoned Alexander had been there awhile. The pillows had been slit open, and the wardrobe drawers tipped out. A soft mulch of feathers covered the floor.

"But wait…" Alexander smiled greedily as he noticed the satchel hanging across Ivy's shoulders. "What have we here?" Stepping closer, he easily slid the bag over Ivy's head and opened it up. "Useless, useless," he muttered, throwing Scratch and Ivy's yo-yo away and into the next room.

Finally he came upon Amos's journal. "Aha!" he exclaimed. "Just where you kept it last time! I only got a peek before."

There was nothing Ivy could do except watch. With Amos's journal in his grasp, Alexander drew so close to Ivy that she could feel his breath against her face. He smelled foul, as if he hadn't washed for weeks. Ivy weighed their options. She couldn't shout for help from Curtis, and Scratch was too far away to whisper to for aid. Perhaps she could try communicating with an object that was closer?

Alexander's eyes flashed hungrily. "The information inside this will help me build my own guild, far more powerful than the *Dirge*." He said the name like it belonged to an idiotic rival. "In exchange for a few formulas of mine, they've been telling me their secrets. Their only strength is their leader. He manipulates all the other members, getting them to do his bidding so that he can take all the glory for New Dawn. But *I* will be a greater leader than even Blackclaw…."

Listening to him gloat, Ivy filled with anger. Alexander hadn't seemed as unhinged as this the last time they'd met. She reckoned that spending time with the Dirge had been a destabilizing experience for him. She scanned the room with her whispering, searching for an object that could help them escape.

"Good leaders set an example to their supporters," Alexander continued. "You and your family must be punished for destroying mine, and for making a fool of me in front of the whole of Lundinor!"

There was a rustle by the door, and a figure in long dark robes glided into the room. Alexander hastily hid Amos's journal behind his back. "You're late," he snapped, glaring at the sunburst clock on the wall.

The stranger turned to face Ivy. His head was covered by a hood and a scaly mask with slits for nostrils. All Ivy could see were his black lips and emaciated neck, as if his body was made only of skin and bone. She had no idea what race of the dead he was. "What's this?" the stranger demanded. "I thought we were leaving Nubrook to meet Blackclaw."

Ivy recognized his hoarse voice immediately: *Monkshood*. Curious, she searched him with her senses. He was carrying several uncommon items. Imprisoned inside one was a broken soul with an old, croaky voice. She thought it might be speaking Japanese, since it sounded like the characters in the anime movies Seb watched. Her heart stirred strangely as she listened to its weary muttering. Ivy had been in the presence of three of the Great Uncommon Good before—the Sack of Stars, the Jar of Shadows and the Stone of Dreams—and she knew what they sounded like. They all had strange, penetrating voices that filled her with emotion. This voice sounded like it had been around for a very long time. It had to be the Sword of Wills…

…which meant Blackclaw didn't have it yet.

"You should have stuck to our original plan," Alexander retorted.

"The only plan that matters is the one that brings about New Dawn," Monkshood said dismissively. Ivy noticed the fingers of his black gloves were creepily thin as pencils. "Have you found the journal? I have just received a message from Blackclaw: he has almost acquired the Sands of Change."

Rosie! Ivy tried struggling again, but it was no use.

Alexander's arm twitched behind his back. "You must use the sword on their friend first. That was our agreement."

The dark eyeholes of Monkshood's mask fell upon Alexander's elbow. Ivy had a feeling he had guessed what Alexander was holding. "Why are you wasting your time with these three uncommoners when New Dawn will change the lives of every uncommoner in the world?"

"You know why!" Alexander barked. He removed another test tube from the leather doctor's bag, this one labeled TELEPORT, and held it threateningly close to his own lips. "I suggest you cooperate before I disappear out of here. I'm the only one who's read the journal. I can tell you Amos's instructions for handling the sword in a way that maximizes its power."

Ivy had a strong suspicion that Alexander was bluffing. She'd been reading and translating the journal for months now and she hadn't discovered any sword-operating guidelines. Alexander had only possessed the journal for a few minutes.

"You might be able to use the sword for small tasks," Alexander sneered, "but if you try wielding it to start New Dawn, you'll cause another storm. You need me."

Monkshood made a hissing, snarling noise. His robes flickered.

From what Alexander had said, Ivy realized she'd been right about a connection between Storm Sarah and the Sword of Wills. It *had* been responsible for the storm—but it had been an accident. Without Amos's advice, Monkshood had lost control of the sword, and Storm Sarah had been the consequence.

"So be it," Monkshood replied. From within the folds of his dark cloak, he withdrew a long black sword with a single-edged, curved blade. The circular guard and grip were patterned with silver stars. It looked a lot like a Japanese katana that Ivy had seen on the cover of one of her dad's books, *Weapons from History.*

Monkshood held the blade horizontally in his nimble fingers, just as Seb had done when he'd been using the uncommon paper knife. After a moment's concentration he released the sword. It hovered away from his gloved hands, the point toward Valian, and started spinning….

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Adrenaline shot through Ivy's numb body. Her mind sharpened. She focused her whispering senses inside the Sword of Wills, desperately trying to communicate with the resident soul. After it failed to understand English, she tried sending it relaxing images, hoping to encourage it to slow down—a wave gently lapping the sand, a bird landing on water…

…but the blade persisted.

Eventually, Monkshood controlled the sword to a stop. There was a leather cord attached to the scabbard, which he slipped over his head so that the blade hung at his back. Except it wasn't exactly "hanging"—Ivy could see the handle hovering above Monkshood's shoulders, powered by some invisible force.

Valian, no—! Ivy shouted inside as Valian stepped into her line of sight. His movements were stiff and robotic as he stood to attention before Monkshood. Valian's dark eyes had glazed over and his expression was blank, as if he'd been hypnotized. Ivy understood what had happened: the Sword of Wills had broken the effect of Alexander's Statue Salt and taken control of Valian's mind.

"You will do exactly as I say," Monkshood told Valian. "Climb to the top of Breath Falls and jump off."

Ivy's heart flinched—*No!* She tried to wrestle her limbs free again, but it was no use.

Valian nodded once and, with Monkshood—and the Sword of Wills—carefully accompanying him, he marched out of the room without looking back.

A satisfied grin spread across Alexander’s face. Desperately, Ivy skimmed the room with her whispering senses. The soul within the lava lamp spoke with an American slow Southern drawl. *Help me,* she begged. *I have to save my friend.*

Then, without waiting for a reply, she moved her senses on and reached for the tin music box in the old doctor’s bag. *Please turn backward,* she pleaded. *My brother and I are trapped. We need to save our friend. You’ve got to help us.*

The lava lamp responded first, darkening the room with images of an erupting volcano. Fiery ash rained from the sky; the stink of sulfur filled Ivy’s nostrils. Alexander looked confusedly from the walls to the door like he didn’t know whether to run or applaud. Visions of pterodactyls roared through the black sky before dive-bombing him. He ducked and covered his head, knocking his doctor’s bag onto the carpet….

And that was when Ivy saw the music box roll out and the handle rotate backward.

The shrill tune sounded eerie played in reverse. As the melody penetrated Ivy’s ears, she felt her limbs loosen and her muscles rush with blood.

“No!” Alexander blurted, hastily recovering the music box from the floor. He fumbled for the handle and yanked it, but by then it was too late.

Ivy kicked with all her might and stumbled forward. Seb punched his arms free, as though he was breaking out of a block of ice. He grabbed the object nearest to him: Alexander’s leather doctor’s bag.

“That’s for Valian, you loser!” he yelled, swinging it into Alexander’s side.

Alexander thudded hard against the bed. Ivy heard the smash of glass, and a cloud of green vapor started rising out of the top of the bag.

“Seb, we’ve got to save Valian!” Ivy gasped as Alexander wobbled to his feet, looking stunned. Collecting her satchel, she dragged her brother into the lounge and grabbed Scratch, who had rolled under a coffee table.

“Ivy curtains yo-yo beside,” he told her helpfully.

Dashing to the window, she collected her weapon from the floor. She stuffed the yo-yo in her right pocket and Scratch in her left. Glancing at the buildings opposite gave her an idea. “Help me open this. We need to get out onto the veranda.”

Seb slid up the pane of glass so they could both squeeze out—

Behind them there was a sudden loud clatter as Curtis burst through the door. She made a split-second assessment of the scene: the suite in ruins; Ivy and Seb about to escape through the window; Alexander Brewster on his feet hurtling through from the next room…

…and she rugby-tackled him to the ground. “Go!” she cried to Ivy and Seb.

With one hand on the railing, Ivy waved a thumb in the air, and a worn and dusty carpet appeared a moment later, hovering at the same level as the balcony.

“Where you off to?” asked the woman with dark curly hair riding on top.

“The summit of Breath Falls,” Ivy said, climbing over the railing. She heard Curtis and Alexander shouting as she and Seb sat down on the rug. “We need to be quick.”

“You’ll have to pay extra for water damage,” the lady noted firmly.

“We know!” Ivy insisted. “Please, hurry!”

As they zoomed over Nubrook, Ivy and Seb tried to pick out Valian in the crowded streets below. Everywhere Ivy looked, Thanksgiving festivities were in full swing: troops of dancers paraded through the streets; music and confetti filled the air; and huge uncommon ribbons floated between buildings, writing messages of celebration.

“Ivy, Alexander is after us!” Seb warned. “Something must have happened to Curtis.”

She checked over her shoulder. Alexander was pursuing them on the back of a cylinder vacuum cleaner, the nozzle flapping in the wind.

Ivy hoped Curtis was OK. “He’s still got Amos’s journal,” she observed, catching sight of it tucked under his arm. She was annoyed at herself for not grabbing it earlier. “We’ve got to slow him down. We can’t fight him *and* Monkshood.” She whipped out her yo-yo and, aiming it carefully, flicked her wrist. Twisting torrents of air formed on either side of the spinning toy and merged into a single whirlwind, which surged toward Alexander. Sucking clumps of confetti from the air, the cyclone quickly took on the appearance of a giant spool of rainbow cotton candy.

Just as it was about to collide with Alexander, he managed to dodge aside…right into the path of an uncommon ribbon looped into a “Happy Thanksgiving!” message. Alexander tried to bat the ribbon away, but it got tangled around his arms, causing him to lose control of the vacuum cleaner. He went spinning across the road and landed on the awning of an Italian gelato stand. Two men wearing gelato-splattered aprons appeared below, shaking their fists and shouting furiously.

Relief washed over Ivy as she turned back around. “Now we just need to rescue Valian,” she said. “Next stop, the Falls.”

As the silver colossus came into sight, their sky driver soared toward Nubrook’s concrete ceiling and then swooped down to land on the statue’s head. Water gurgled over the surface from where the mist condensed into shallow streams. Up close, the structure was made of gray metallic rock that undulated with ripples, giving it the appearance of hair. The sky driver lowered them onto the surface.

Here, the roar of the falls was so loud that Ivy couldn’t hear herself think. “Can you see Valian?” she hollered, searching for any solid form in the mist. Her coat and skin were soaked in seconds.

Seb pointed toward the statue’s hairline, where two dark shapes hovered in the spray. “Over there!”

The ground was slippery underfoot so Ivy trod carefully, grasping the peaks of the statue’s hair to steady herself. As they got closer, the outline of Monkshood’s dark robe became clear. His hood had been pushed off in the wind: a few straggly dark hairs clung to the rear of his skull; the skin on his scalp looked like bathroom mold. Ivy could see the Sword of Wills floating at his back. “How do we release Valian from the influence of the sword?”

“I think we just have to force it away from Monkshood,” Seb said. “I only lost complete control of the paper knife when I wasn’t concentrating on it anymore. Perhaps we need to cause a distraction?”

Ivy grasped her yo-yo. “We need to be careful not to make Valian topple over the edge by accident. He’ll be trying to leap off the whole time.”

“Do you think you could use your whirlwinds,” Seb said, “to push him away from the edge, while I tackle Monkshood?”

Ivy had never used her yo-yo to do that before, but they were low on options. “I’ll do my best,” she replied.

They quickened their pace over the rest of the distance, concentrating hard to stay balanced—it was like running on selkie slime. Valian finally became visible when they were almost within reach of him. He stepped closer to the edge, his expression vacant.

“Now!” Seb shouted, striking out with his drumsticks. Monkshood tumbled back, sliding across the floor.

Aiming more carefully than she ever had before, Ivy generated a trio of tornadoes with her yo-yo. One by one, they lined up at the statue’s hairline and forced the mist back. The water under Ivy’s feet began to ripple in reverse and, slowly, Valian glided to safety. “It’s working!” she cried, although she could see Valian already leaning forward, trying to use his weight to resist.

Monkshood pulled a steel can opener from his cloak and pointed it at the ground, where a glittering pile of metal filings appeared. From out of the filings, six steel-bodied crabs the size of small dogs came to life and scuttled toward Seb. They had razor-sharp pincers and beady black eyes that wiggled around on silver stalks on their heads.

“Ugh! Get away!” Seb yelled, trying to smash them with beats from his drumsticks.

The glinting crabs gripped onto the wet rock as well as real crustaceans, dodging Seb’s blasts, snapping their pincers and drawing ever closer. Down through the mist, Ivy glimpsed a crowd looking up at them. Their presence hadn’t gone unnoticed; several people were already approaching on flying carpets.

Too late, she heard the *whirr* of machinery—

Alexander Brewster dropped from the sky and clattered to the ground. His vacuum cleaner smashed into several pieces and washed over the side. “You will not ruin this!” he shouted as he limped to his feet. His outfit and the journal tucked under his arm were smeared with several different colors of ice cream. “You and everyone you love will pay!”

Ivy checked on Valian, who was wobbling a few feet from the edge, and sent another carefully positioned tornado to keep him in place. Seb was still trying to fend off Monkshood and the steel crabs.

“I’m sorry that you lost your pa!” Ivy shouted to Alexander. “But it wasn’t us who killed him.”

Alexander wiped his face dry, scowling. “You didn’t save him!” he spat.

Just then, one of the steel crabs caught Alexander’s heel with a snip of its pincer. Alexander howled and hopped onto one leg. His foot slipped—

—and, in a streak of shadow, he washed over the side of the waterfall. Ivy hurried to the edge. The nozzle of Alexander’s broken vacuum cleaner had become wrapped around one of the statue’s eyelashes; Alexander was hanging from it one-handed, his limbs flailing in the wind.

“Drop the journal!” Ivy shouted, catching sight of it in his fingers. “You need two hands to climb up.”

Alexander’s face flashed with fear, but, rather than taking Ivy’s advice, he scowled and attempted to haul himself up with one arm. Ivy tried to think of a way to save him. Perhaps if she aimed a tornado under his feet, it would keep him from falling….

“Ivy, look out!” Seb shouted.

She turned. Monkshood was gliding straight toward her. He swiped the Sword of Wills from his back and pointed it at Alexander, who was still dangling in the mist. The katana rotated in midair, faster and faster.

Valian fell to his knees. His gaze sharpened.

“Valian!” Seb hollered, walled in by metal crabs. “Get away from the edge!”

When Ivy looked back at Alexander, his body had gone taut and his face was expressionless. She understood what had happened: the Sword of Wills had relinquished its control over Valian and focused on Alexander instead.

“Throw me Amos Stirling’s journal,” Monkshood demanded.

With all the strength he could muster, Alexander hurled the journal toward the top of the colossus. His body was left swinging precariously. The vacuum nozzle creaked.

“Foolish boy.” Monkshood laughed as he caught the journal and tucked it securely inside his robes. Then, with the Sword of Wills in his grasp, he turned and vanished into thin air—his crab army dematerializing with him.

Alexander’s face twitched; light returned to his eyes. “What—?” In the confusion of remembering where he was, his hand slipped—

Before Ivy could shout, however, a carpet emerged from the spray. Riding atop was Curtis, gripping the shirt collar of a wriggling Alexander.

Ivy slid over to Valian and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder. “It’s all right. You’re safe.”

But, despite having been just moments from death, there was only one thing on Valian’s mind. “Rosie…,” he murmured. *“We have to find Rosie.”*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The underguard station was buzzing with activity when Ivy, Seb and Valian returned. A constant stream of Tidemonger agents—Ivy could tell because of the divergent arrow symbols on their clothing—flitted to and fro across reception, disappearing through different doors. Short puffs sounded every few moments as featherlight messages arrived for the underguard officers on duty behind the coffin desk. Scribbling feverishly, they sent responses while other guards hurried in and out of the discocommunicator room. The walls of the building vibrated with the rumble of the growing crowd outside, eager to learn what was happening.

Water dripped from the hem of Ivy's duffle coat as she shifted in her chair, drawing the unwavering stares of three underguard officers standing opposite. Their hands rested threateningly on their toilet brushes, their expressions unflinching. Valian and Seb had been made to sit a chair apart in the same row so they could all be watched closely. Judy—who arrived after hearing what had happened from a street vendor near Breath Falls—had been allowed to sit beside Ivy.

"Seeing as we're not allowed to leave here again," Seb muttered, shivering, "can one of you officers get us some hot drinks? Or maybe even a dry blanket?"

The underguards didn't react. Ivy wondered if the post-ordeal care package had been canceled in the aftermath of her and Valian's break-in to the discocommunicator room. Or maybe these three just weren't the warm fuzzy types.

“What do you think they’re doing?” she asked, squinting at the darkened glass door through which Johnny Hands, Curtis and several senior underguards had stepped almost an hour ago. “They’ve been in there for ages.”

“They’re probably contacting more Tidemongers and other underguard cohorts to tell them about Monkshood,” Valian said, folding his arms. “They’ve got to plan their response to stop people from panicking.”

Ivy wished she could un-see the stunned and terrified faces of the traders in Nubrook’s streets as they’d flown down from the waterfall on Curtis’s carpet. Everyone knew that another member of the Dirge was out in the open. Security would be heightened throughout the uncommon world. Thanksgiving celebrations would be canceled.

“What about the Dirge?” Seb said quietly. “Monkshood will soon give Octavius Wrench the Sword of Wills *and* Amos’s journal. After that, New Dawn could start at any moment.”

Ivy thought of all those cities around the world that would be overrun by races of the dead…and London first. Her nerves felt as damp as her clothes. She sniffed and looked at Judy. “We have to find Rosie and the Sands of Change,” she said firmly. “Did you see Mr. Rife at the auction house?”

“Not personally, no,” Judy said, sounding irritated. “Uncommon bridal veils have been placed around the building since yesterday—they prevent any travel through the walls. Without an invitation I couldn’t get in, but, according to a couple of guests I asked outside, Mr. Rife *is* there. He just doesn’t want any unwelcome guests.”

“Even if we do somehow escape from this place, we’ll be too late to catch him.” Valian sounded almost defeated. “The auction is due to finish any moment now. We know Mr. Rife is going to visit Midas, his buyer, afterward. As soon as he gets in that pram, we have to be ready to go after him. He’s the only person who might know what happened to Rosie.”

Just then, the darkened glass door opened and Curtis and Johnny Hands emerged. Ivy scrutinized them to see if she could work out what had happened. Curtis’s head scarf was blotchy from water stains, the sleeves of her trench coat rolled up past her elbows to reveal another layer of clothing beneath. A sheen of sweat coated her skin. It looked like she’d been busy. Johnny Hands looked no less exhausted. Even his wobbling red-and-blue jester's hat didn't detract from the grim look on his face.

Curtis marched over to the reception desk and spoke urgently with the underguards sitting behind it. The officers watching Ivy and the others stood up and went over to join them.

"We don't have much time," Johnny Hands said, sitting down on a seat opposite them. He leaned forward, gathering them around. "Alexander Brewster's been charged. The officers here believe there's plenty of evidence to have him convicted, so I doubt he'll be trying to kill you again anytime soon."

Ivy felt conflicted at the news. She knew that Alexander needed to pay for his crimes. And yet…the overwhelming feeling she had when she thought about him wasn't anger; it was pity. She wanted to believe there was still hope in the future for him.

"Turns out Alexander wasn't very loyal to the Dirge," Johnny Hands added. "He actually gave us the identity and location of Nightshade in exchange for a nicer cell. We've deployed a team of agents to go and arrest her."

So Nightshade was a woman, Ivy thought, but then her surprise and relief were tainted by another thought: having another member of the Dirge unmasked was a positive step, but it didn't solve the bigger problem. "What about Monkshood and the Sword of Wills?" she asked.

"That *is* slightly more complicated," Johnny Hands admitted. "But it's not for you to worry about. My orders are to send you and your brother home."

"Home?" Seb's voice faltered. "You mean, London?"

"London, the Old Smoke, Thames City—whatever you want to call it. Agent Curtis has organized everything with your parents, who are expecting you back today. I thought you'd be concerned about them, so I've pulled a few strings and arranged for a couple of Special Branch officers to be stationed outside your house in case Octavius Wrench turns up." He gave Valian and Judy a wonky smile. "You're both free to join them, if you'd like."

Valian shook his head. "Er—thanks, but I've got somewhere to be."

"Me too," Judy said, her shoulders drooping as she looked across at Ivy and Seb.

“We can’t go home yet,” Ivy told Johnny Hands. “There’s something we need to do.”

He winced. “I thought you might say that. The thing is…your parents aren’t considered high-priority assets, but you are. The only way to protect them is for you all to be in the same building. So if you remain here, those Special Branch officers will be deployed on other duties, and your parents will be all on their own.”

Ivy flashed her brother a panicked look. The Dirge could attack London at any moment and their parents would be defenseless….Then again, they couldn’t abandon Valian now. Four heads were better than two: they’d have a better chance of finding Rosie if they stuck together.

“Curtis has arranged for you to travel to London via uncommon drawer,” Johnny Hands explained. “Whatever your decision, I wish you luck. In the meantime, I have work to do. Goodbye, Ivy Sparrow.”

—

After the furor of the morning’s celebrations, the streets of Nubrook were quiet now. The shops had shut early, but a few bars and restaurants were open, a sprinkling of customers watching sports on huge materializers inside. Steam fragranced with roast turkey escaped from the occasional kitchen window, and chatter spilled from terraces. Ivy considered how many of Nubrook’s residents might have changed their traditional Thanksgiving Day plans after the events on top of Breath Falls.

After returning from Guesthouse Swankypants with a small bundle of singed clothes, Curtis escorted Ivy and Seb to the drawer-station. Walking alongside them, Judy and Valian were unusually quiet.

“Keep up, you four!” Curtis called from up ahead.

Every time Ivy caught the look of disappointment on Valian’s face, the bagel she’d nibbled at the underguard station that morning threatened to reappear. With time running out, in the end she and Seb had agreed to Curtis’s plan. Her legs tightened as they walked by a troop of severe-looking underguards marching in the opposite direction. There were more around than normal. Groups of two or three stood on street corners, patrolling with their toilet brushes on show. Ivy guesstimated how big the underguard force was in Lundinor and whether there would be enough of them to defend London from the Dirge's army.

They passed the bench that Seb had turned into an Andy Warhol installation with Rosie's Missing posters. As Ivy studied the different-colored versions of Rosie's picture, a new detail suddenly jumped out at her. "Seb, hold still," she said.

She took out her ping-pong ball and threw it at his back: Rosie's poster appeared on his hoodie. He yanked it up at the shoulders to see what she'd done. "Ivy!" he spluttered.

"It's important," she told him. "I need to take a closer look at the photo and I can't slow everyone down."

As they walked, Ivy examined Rosie's necklace with fresh consideration. It had a metallic rope chain and a large pendant featuring a black crystal in a silver mount. "Valian," she asked, "that necklace Rosie is wearing—do you have another photo of it?"

Valian took a fifty-pence coin from his pocket and flipped it over between his fingers. A different image of Rosie appeared with each turn. Ivy knew that uncommon coins were used a bit like photo albums. "No, I don't think so," Valian said. "She's not wearing it in any of these." He looked again at Seb's back. "Why do you ask?"

Ivy hesitated, thinking of the discussion she'd had with Seb about the strange "bathed in breath" phrase from Amos's riddle. "The rhyme in Amos's journal—'crystal droplet, bathed in breath, clasped within silver hands'…well, Rosie's necklace would fit the bill perfectly. Her crystal pendant has a silver frame; and wearing it around her neck, she'd breathe on it all the time."

"You think her *necklace* is the Sands of Change?" Judy had skated closer and was resting a hand on Seb's shoulder to examine the photo too.

"Look, I could just take my hoodie off," Seb pointed out as they continued to peer at his back. "That way we could all see."

Valian rubbed his forehead. "I wish I could remember more clearly what I saw through the Frozen Telescope. There *might* have been a necklace on that table…."

"If there was, it could easily have slipped off when you and Rosie jumped out at your parents—and it would be the right size to fit in Rosie's pocket," Ivy said, easing the facts into place. "Is it something she would have been likely to take?"

"She liked glitter and sparkly stuff, so yeah." He looked again at Rosie's photo, his brow hardening.

"Hold everything," Judy said, lifting an uncommon cufflink closer to her face. "The coordinates on this have changed—Mr. Rife has moved. Here, take this—"

Without stopping, she unfolded a world map from her pocket and gave it to Valian, then relayed the numbers. "He's in Tibet," Valian said, tracing his finger across the page. "Strassa."

Ivy peered closer. The gradient lines on the map were compactly spaced, indicating steep mountains. She remembered seeing the advertisement for Strassa on the boarded-up shop two days ago—the WORLD'S FIRST SKYMART! "That's aboveground," she observed. "It'll have natural light, so Octavius Wrench could exist there without help from Alexander's potion."

"There's no time to lose," Valian said, folding the map away and stuffing it back in his pocket. "Judy, we have to leave *now*. Ivy, Seb…get home safe." Then he turned in the opposite direction. Judy smiled weakly at Ivy and Seb before she and Valian hurried away.

Ivy's legs twitched, wanting to join them. She felt awful.

Curtis, Seb and Ivy turned into a marble courtyard where stationmasters in red uniform were standing in a grid formation. Resting beside each of them was a set of drawers labeled with a different number. Uncommoners stood waiting between the chests, fidgeting and chatting. Ivy assumed it was the equivalent of a major transport depot.

Curtis approached a mirrored dressing table with six drawers. The stationmaster dipped his head. "Miss?"

"These two are to travel to drawer 262 in London," she told him. "I will be accompanying them." She gave him a piece of paper stamped with the divergent arrow crest.

The stationmaster read it quickly. "As you wish." He handed them a ticket each and signaled to chest number 36. "Please join that line."

Curtis herded Ivy and Seb over, checking the faces in the crowds. Ivy examined her ticket. It had been stamped with two words: ONE JOURNEY.

"I wonder if there's a drawer in one of these chests that goes to Strassa," Seb whispered in her ear.

“What difference does it make?” Ivy asked, watching Curtis double-check she had her common mobile phone stowed in her pocket. “Mum and Dad are at home, waiting for us. You heard what Johnny Hands said: they’ll only be protected if we’re with them.”

“We can’t just sit at home waiting for New Dawn to happen,” Seb argued. “I’ve been thinking: maybe the *best* way to safeguard our parents is to help save Rosie first. The Dirge are still hunting for her and the Sands of Change; if we can find her before they do, we can stop them from using another of the Great Uncommon Good. That might give the Tidemongers and the underguards a better chance of defeating them.”

“I don’t…” Ivy hesitated, feeling torn. The last thing she wanted to do was destroy the one chance their parents had of being safe when New Dawn began…but Rosie’s life was at stake too. And Seb was right: if the Dirge got hold of the Sands of Change, they would be unstoppable.

London or Strassa? Both options seemed like the right thing to do, but she could only pick one. In the end she listened to the sinking feeling in her gut that had started when Valian and Judy left. “You’re right,” she told her brother. “We should be with Valian. We’ve got to see this through to the end.”

Seb lowered his head to Ivy’s pocket. “Scratch, buddy, you listening? Can you read *Farrow’s Guide* and see which one of these things goes to Strassa?”

Ivy’s bag vibrated. “One hundred and sixty-six,” Scratch said in a muffled voice.

“I can see it.” Ivy pointed to a rickety wooden chest with a fabric top, a few chests along in the same row. “We’ll have to switch drawers at the last minute, once Curtis is inside the drawer to London.”

The stationmaster checked his pocket watch before finally opening the top drawer in the chest. Ivy scrutinized the uncommoners lining up in front, who took turns boarding. “Adults to load first, please,” the stationmaster instructed. “They take up more space.”

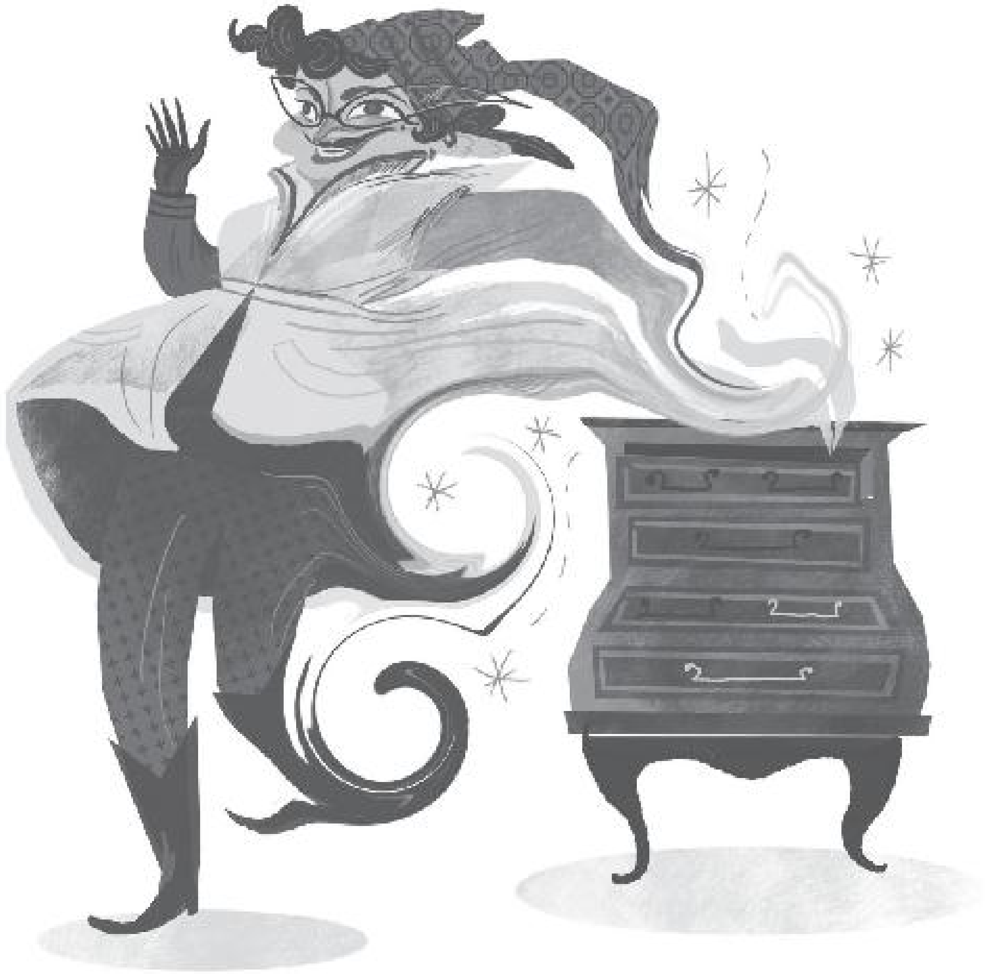
The pavement rumbled as their bodies turned into tiny golden lights that flew into the drawer, like dust being sucked into a vacuum cleaner.

Ivy nervously adjusted her coat as they approached the head of the line.

“First time?” the stationmaster asked Ivy and Seb. “You won’t feel a thing. Just place your hand inside the drawer. After you, madam.”

Curtis assessed Ivy and Seb carefully. “I’ll be waiting for you in there. Just be quick.” She scanned the nearby faces one last time before moving her hand into the drawer.

Ivy noticed Curtis’s head scarf ruffle as a strange wind passed over her, and then, with a golden flash, she disappeared. Ivy went leaden with guilt, hoping they were about to do the right thing. “Come on,” she said, grabbing Seb’s hand. “Let’s go save Rosie.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

The drawer to Strassa was dark and smelled overwhelmingly of talcum powder, making Ivy's nose twitch. She tried to peel her foot away from someone's thigh, but there was no other space to put it. She understood now what Valian had meant by "those *impossibly cramped* drawers."

"Scooos me," Seb mumbled in a muffled voice. Ivy glimpsed him a few bodies away, his sweaty forehead pressed against the shoulder of a woman wearing a flamenco dress. She wondered how Curtis was faring in the drawer to London, and whether she'd yet realized that Ivy and Seb wouldn't be joining her.

There was a loud rumble, and then clear light appeared in the cracks between passengers. Other people started shuffling; Ivy felt a stream of hot air circle around her. Light flashed all around, and before she knew it, she was crouched on an area of pavement, surrounded by people in Hobsmatch.

"I can't believe uncommoners actually pay to travel like that," Seb grumbled next to her, wiping his face clean with the sleeve of his hoodie.

Ivy could see the pores of his skin as clear as if they were under a spotlight. She looked up and her ankles wobbled. "Seb, are you seeing this?"

He craned his neck. "No. Way."

They were on a star-shaped platform jutting out from the side of a craggy mountain. Its snowy brothers rose into the blue sky for miles in either direction. *The Himalayas!* Ivy's heart stirred with emotion; it was the most spectacular sight she had ever seen.

"Look over there—camels!" Seb cried.

Ivy groaned and turned to where a small enclosure of packhorses, donkeys and camels were being offered to traders needing help to carry goods. All around, uncommoners were wrestling with overflowing boxes or towing heavy carts. She cast her gaze through the crowd, looking for anyone in a black suit and bowler hat—all this natural light would be perfect for Octavius Wrench.

"This must be the equivalent of the arrivals chamber," Seb decided. "So…where's the skymart?"

On the opposite side of the platform, a doorframe the size of a three-story building stood astride one of the star's points. In place of a door there was a brightly colored beaded curtain decorated with chrysanthemum flowers and hanging chimes.

"Through there, I guess. Whatever's behind it must be invisible." Ivy angled her head and caught flickers of a thin dome of light surrounding them. From the poster she'd seen of Strassa, she knew the skymart was constructed from a number of different platforms slotted together. Maybe the reason they couldn't see the adjoining one was because each had its own invisible covering. That would also explain how commoners couldn't see the skymart.

Seb stripped off his hoodie and tied it around his waist. "Hopefully Valian and Judy haven't already gone inside; we'd better start looking." Ivy removed her duffle coat; the sun was surprisingly warm.

Meandering through the crowd, Ivy caught alternative wafts of manure and sweet incense. She scanned for Judy using her whispering, but there were so many races of the dead around, it wasn't easy. Seb picked up a freshly printed copy of *Strassa: Farrow's Guide for the Traveling Tradesman* and borrowed Scratch from Ivy's pocket in order to read it.

" '*…advanced uncommon technology controls the temperature and air quality inside Strassa and offers year-round protection from wind, rain and snow,*' " Scratch read. " '*The control hub of the skymart is situated inside the mountain, where technicians also manufacture uncommon equipment for other undermarts in the world. Officials estimate that the* *skymart will be finished in two years, once expansion inside the mountain is comp—' "*

"Found her!" Ivy interrupted, picking out the soothing voice of Judy's broken soul among the crowd. "This way." She stuffed Scratch and *Farrow's Guide* in her pocket and dragged Seb in the direction of the giant beaded curtain, where a mass of people were waiting to pass through.

Valian's face lit up when he saw them running over. "You're here!" Without thinking, he hugged them firmly. "What about your mum and dad?"

"They'll be OK," Ivy said. That heavy feeling in her gut hadn't gone away, but, seeing how much their being there meant to Valian, she knew they'd made the right choice.

"Glad you came," Judy said, smiling at Seb. "Strassa is twelve hours ahead of Nubrook. Right now it's seven in the morning on the first day of trade. There are ID checks to get in—it'll be busy."

Ivy saw men in green-and-silver uniforms standing in a line across the entrance. Large silver bells etched with a fingerprint symbol stood on tables beside each officer.

"Must be a reaction to Monkshood's appearance on top of Breath Falls," Valian commented. "There are more skyguards on duty here than I've ever seen before."

While they got in line, Ivy nervously fingered the copy of *Farrow's Guide,* hoping that their last-minute drawer-hopping hadn't raised any alarms in Nubrook. The paper felt crisp and unwrinkled. Curious, she took a look at the author's biography on the back cover. "Frederick Ignacio Farrow," it said, "is the pseudonym of a writer who started traveling at a young age, after the death of his intrepid explorer parents left him an orphan." The Strassa guidebook was the most recent Mr. Farrow had written.

"Gloves on?" Seb asked. Everyone in line around them was pulling on a different pair.

Ivy cringed at her dress gloves, now mud-stained and grubby. "Yeah."

At the front of the line, she was asked to ring one of the large silver bells. *"Ivy Sparrow. Junior trader. Primary undermart: Lundinor in the United Kingdom,"* the bell said in a clear, high voice.

The skyguard stepped aside to let Ivy pass. As she waited for the others to join her, she listened to the bells announcing their details. Instead of “junior trader,” Valian got “scout” and Judy “waitress.” The bell also told everyone that Judy was “Dead. Classification: Phantom.”

The four of them walked through the beaded curtain together. The chimes tinkled as chrysanthemum petals fell into everyone’s hair. On the other side, Ivy saw a city of modest wooden buildings arranged around a stunning jade temple on a hill. The structure had translucent green walls and a roof decorated with silver crescent moons. In the streets below, Tibetan writing decorated the brightly colored shop fronts, and rich fabrics embroidered with gold thread hung from the balconies. Ivy noticed that, like Lundinor and Nubrook, Strassa had its own special streetlamps—shaped like tall flowers with white petals. Every door had a colorful rope knocker.

“Does that include a map?” Judy asked, pointing to *Farrow’s Guide.*

The Lundinor guide didn’t, but Ivy flipped through the Strassa guide anyway. Inside she found what she assumed was a street plan. The names were all written in code, but the grids were numbered. Judy checked the coordinates on the cufflink against the map. “Looks like Mr. Rife’s pram is not too far away. Follow me.”

She led them to a stable courtyard filled with yurt cafés selling everything from yak meat wraps to thenthuk—a Tibetan noodle soup. The stables were used to store various vacuum cleaners, doormats and rolled rugs. Seb spotted Mr. Rife’s pram in one corner, and after checking the coast was clear, they crept over.

The pram was covered by the same see-through silvery sheet that Ivy had seen draped over it before. “The covering is uncommon,” she told the others. “What does it do?”

Valian took a step back. “It must be a security blanket. They read fingerprints. If anyone other than the official owner touches it”—he pulled a gross face—“imagine being covered head to foot in a sticky spiderweb, unable to move from the spot.”

Ivy looked closer, careful not to make contact. The gold magnifying glass, which Mr. Rife had said he was delivering to the mysterious Midas, was wrapped in a neat bundle inside, along with Mrs. Bees’s flowery apron and Mr. Rife's feathered hat. "If that magnifying glass is still here, they can't be meeting the buyer yet. Where do you think they've gone?"

"I don't know," Valian said. "We'll have to stake out the site until they return."

They took a table outside Yak-Attacks Yurt House. Seb brought over some fried meat dumplings and two jugs of water. Ivy tucked in: she hadn't eaten since her bagel that morning…or rather yesterday morning. She kept forgetting it was Friday in Strassa now.

"If it's called the Sands of *Change*—it must be able to transform things," Seb guessed, guzzling from his glass. "Perhaps you wear it around your neck and it changes your appearance."

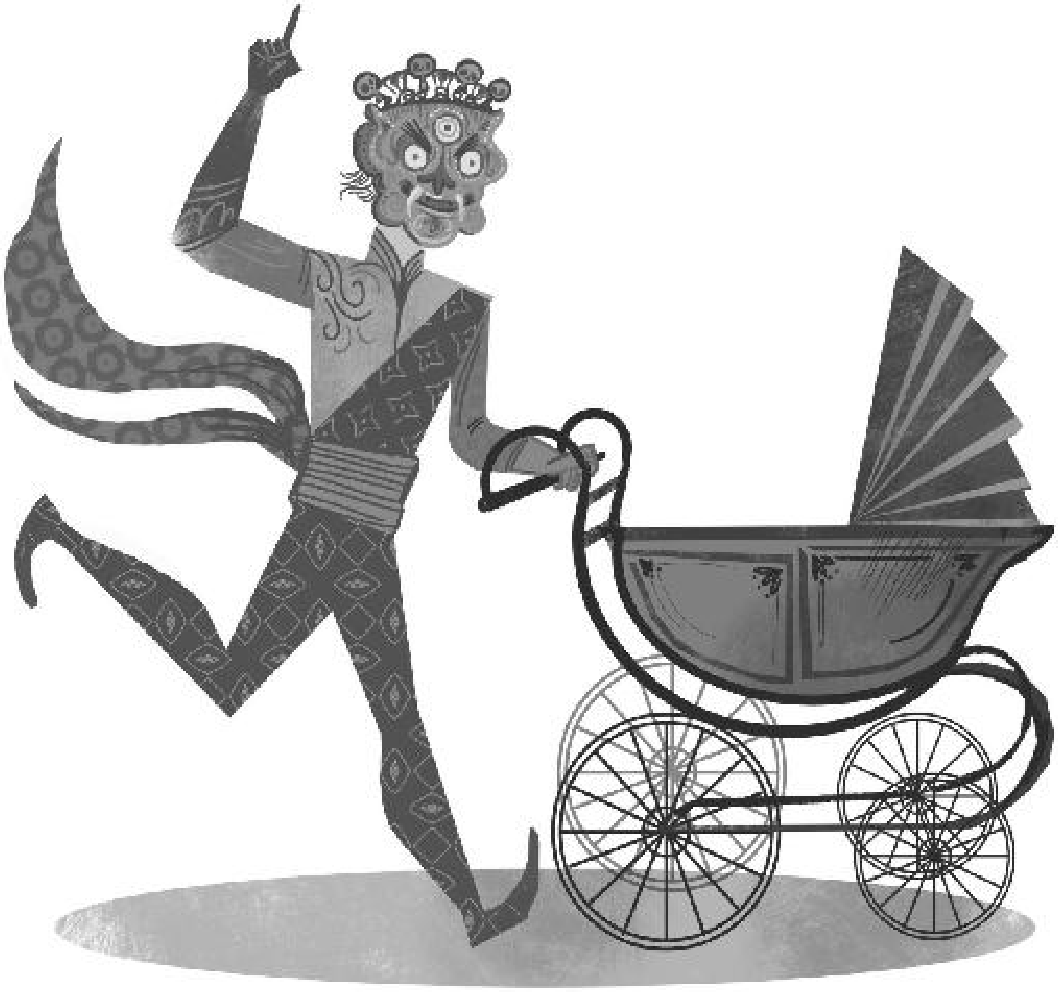
"That might explain why no one's ever seen Rosie," Valian said. "She could look completely different."

As they cleared up their empty plates, they heard cheering from the street. Ivy and Judy went to investigate. A parade of costumed dancers was moving along the road, performing a series of solemn movements. They each wore a crown of small skulls and a menacing mask painted red, yellow and black. Musicians clashed cymbals and banged drums at the rear of the procession. Ivy overheard a few English-speaking tourists discussing how the traditional Tibetan costumes were meant to represent demons and angry spirits.

"Must be a celebration for the opening day of trade," Judy guessed. "Wait—look." Watching the dancers from the other side of the road were Mrs. Bees and Mr. Rife…with the gold magnifying glass in his gloved hand.

As if on cue, Valian and Seb came running out of the courtyard. "It's gone!" Seb said. "The pram. The blanket. Everything. We must have missed them."

"Not quite." Ivy pointed. Rather than tapping his feet to the beat, Mr. Rife was carefully scrutinizing the parade. One of the masked dancers broke formation and slipped to the side of the road. The dancer nodded at Mr. Rife and Mrs. Bees before guiding them away, wheeling the pram beside them.



“That must be the buyer, Midas,” Valian said. “Let’s go.”

They crossed the road and trailed Mr. Rife, Mrs. Bees and the masked dancer at a distance, ducking behind stalls and snaking through the crowd. Skirting the jade temple, the masked dancer turned toward the mountain and ventured into an area of the skymart still under construction. It was eerily quiet in this part. Trucks and diggers stood idle, piles of earth lay abandoned beside the sandy makeshift roads. Ivy noticed cotton reels, kitchen whisks and high-heeled shoes dotted about the site—all uncommon building tools. She guessed that all the workers had taken the day off, as it was the first day of trade.

Suddenly Mrs. Bees screamed. Valian pulled them all behind a stack of paving slabs and they looked out. Mr. Rife, his hands held up in defense, was edging away from the masked dancer. “Midas?” he spluttered. “Is that really you? What is the meaning of this?”

The dancer held a long white electric cord as if it were a whip. On the tip was a three-pin plug…except the pins looked more like stainless-steel claws. They gave a hissing laugh and lashed the cord through the air, striking Mr. Rife in the leg and tearing at his flesh.

“Gah!” Mr. Rife cried, and fell to his knees, trying to protect his head with his arms. The dancer threw something toward Mrs. Bees, and her wrists sprang together as if they were connected by elastic. An uncommon paper clip. Ivy had been restrained in a similar manner before. She fumbled for her yo-yo as the dancer began to drag Mrs. Bees away.

“Come on, we have to do something!” Dashing from her hiding place, Ivy spotted Mrs. Bees and the masked dancer vanishing around the corner of a newly laid brick wall.

“No!” Mr. Rife yelled, staggering to his feet. “Whoever you are, take the necklace and let the girl go!” Judy and Valian hurtled past him in pursuit; Ivy and Seb stopped to help Mr. Rife.

“Slow down or you’ll make your leg worse,” Seb said, pushing his shoulder under Mr. Rife’s armpit to keep him upright. “You’re too weak to chase after them.” Ivy tried to brace Mr. Rife’s other side. His trousers were torn and soaked with blood from his wound, which was bleeding badly.

“I’ve got to help her,” Mr. Rife persisted, dragging his injured leg forward, but it wouldn’t support his weight and he crumpled in Ivy’s and Seb’s arms.

After a few minutes, footsteps sounded as Judy and Valian came running back. “They’ve flown into a dark tunnel on the back of a carpet,” Judy said. “It leads into the mountain. We tracked them to a T-junction, but it was impossible to tell which way they’ve gone from there—they were too far ahead.”

Valian marched up to Mr. Rife. “Where is my sister?” he demanded.

Mr. Rife muttered a curse, rubbing his bad leg.

“Tell me!” Valian kicked the floor in frustration, possibly to avoid kicking Mr. Rife himself. “You lied to us—you *have* seen her. You shook hands with her on the day she disappeared.”

Ivy noticed something glittering in the sand and bent down to pick it up. “A crooked sixpence…?” She beheld Mr. Rife. “*You* are a member of the Dirge?”

“Wh-what?” he stuttered. “No…no—the dancer in the mask dropped that.”

Ivy wasn’t sure whether to believe him, until she remembered that Mr. Punch had told them he’d seen Valian and Mr. Rife embracing as friends in the face of an uncommon clock. Surely Valian wouldn’t do that if Mr. Rife was lying now?

“The dancer must be a member of the Dirge,” Ivy realized. “But—I thought they were your mysterious buyer, Midas?”

“As did I, at first,” Mr. Rife said, “but the real Midas wouldn’t have done this; I’ve traded with Midas before. Whoever the dancer is, they’re an imposter.”

“I don’t get it,” Seb said. “What would the Dirge want with Mrs. Bees?”

“You don’t understand”—Mr. Rife rubbed his face with his hands—“I’ve failed her.”

Ivy considered what Seb had suggested when they were eating dumplings—that the Sands of Change must have the power of transformation. “You said just now, ‘Take the necklace and let the girl go,’ ” she reminded Mr. Rife. An idea lodged in her head. It seemed unlikely, and yet…

“Is Mrs. Bees…*Rosie*?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Steady," Seb warned, trying to keep Mr. Rife upright. "Let me help you sit down." He carefully lowered Mr. Rife to the ground and propped him up against a wooden post that formed part of a building frame. The pram creaked beside them.

Ivy rolled up Mr. Rife's torn trouser leg and considered what their mum—a nurse—would do. "I think we need to put pressure on his wound to stop the bleeding."

"Here, we can use this—" Judy tore off a section of her waistcoat and ripped it in two. Ivy tied one strip around Mr. Rife's thigh to stem the flow of blood; the other she wrapped firmly around the wound. Judy pressed down on the lesion with both hands.

Valian hadn't moved a muscle. "Is that *true*? Is Rosie really Mrs. Bees?"

Mr. Rife rubbed his hip and took a long sigh. "Six years ago, I found a girl hiding in the Dead End of Lundinor. She was all alone and crying, kept muttering something about her murdered parents and brother. I shook her hand to reassure her. She told me her name was Rosie."

"What?" Valian swayed. Ivy took his arm and helped him sit down.

"I heard underguards calling her name and assumed she was in trouble," Mr. Rife continued. "Being an orphan myself, I took pity on her and offered to help her escape. You must believe me, Valian: I didn't know you were alive. I thought Rosie's entire family was Departed."

Ivy could feel Valian trembling, but whether with shock or anger she wasn't sure. A lump formed in the back of her throat.

"Rosie was wearing a necklace that I'd only seen once, seven centuries ago, in China: the Sands of Change—one of the Great Uncommon Good. I knew how it worked, so I decided to use it to disguise Rosie so that she wouldn't be recognized leaving the Dead End."

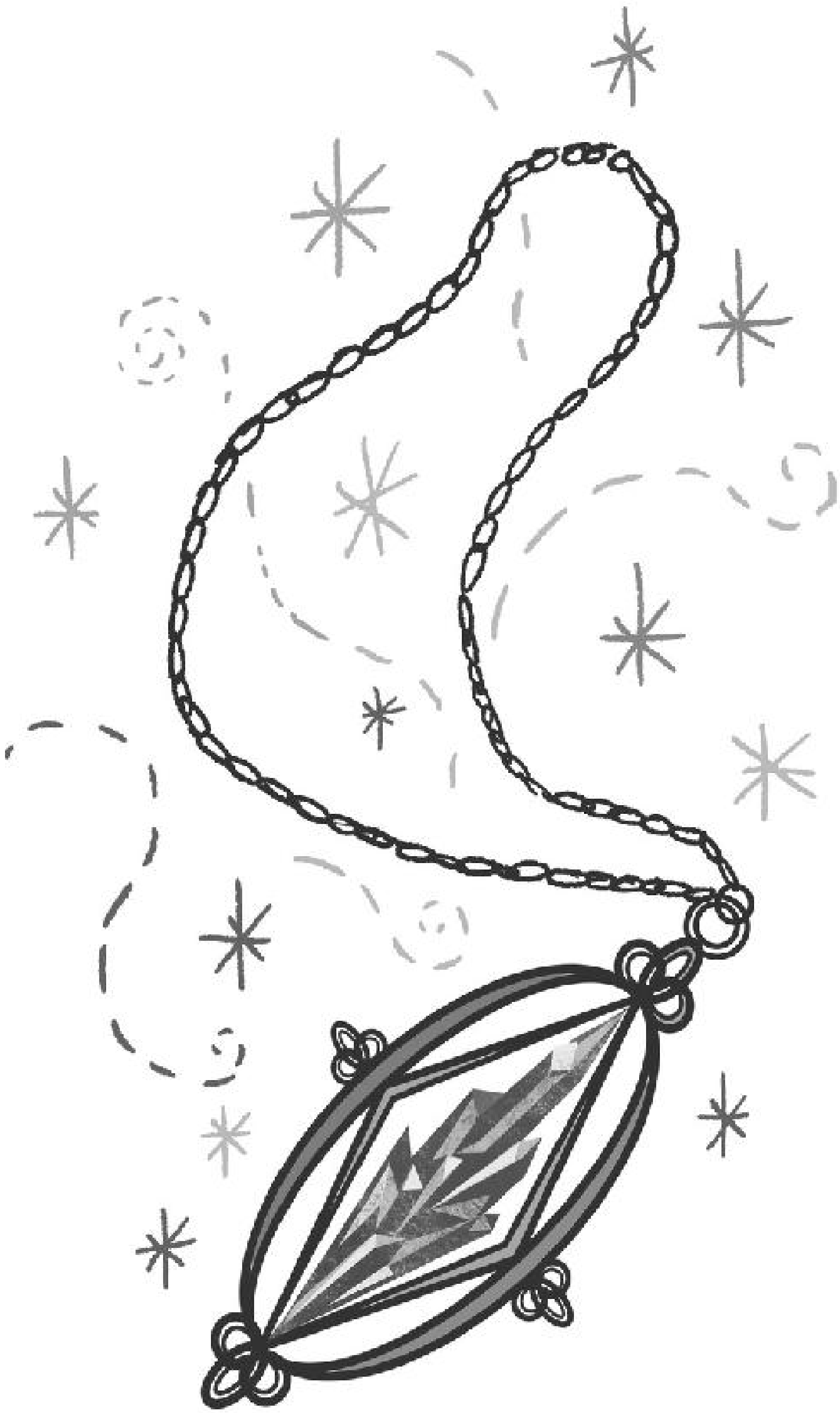
*Seven centuries ago…*Ivy contemplated how long Mr. Rife had been dead. It didn't surprise her that he'd heard about the Great Uncommon Good if he'd been around for *that* long.

“Disguise?” Valian retorted. “You turned her into a different person! I met Mrs. Bees—she didn’t know who I was.”

Mr. Rife studied the ground, his voice weary. “Please, just let me explain. There’s no time. A principle of some ancient philosophies is the belief that the natural world consists of pairs of interconnected contrary forces—summer and winter, fire and water, yin and yang—which all rely on each other to exist. These opposites are present inside every one of us too. The Sands of Change works by taking one of these forces and flipping it around.”

…Light to darkness, life to death, Ivy thought, remembering the words from the rhyme in Amos’s journal. “The most obvious difference between Mrs. Bees and Rosie is their age,” she said carefully. “Did the locket convert Rosie’s youth into old age?”

“Yes,” Mr. Rife answered. “Only, that wasn’t all. Unbeknownst to me, the clasp on the necklace had been sabotaged, so I was unable to remove the Sands of Change from around Rosie’s neck after we had escaped. The pendant continued to alter more aspects of who Rosie was until only Mrs. Bees remained. Mrs. Bees isn’t aware that she has a brother. She doesn’t even know who Rosie is.”



That was why Rosie had never come looking for Valian, Ivy realized. She scanned his face. His expression was taut. “There’s got to be a way to undo the transformation and get Rosie back,” he said decisively.

Mr. Rife sighed. “The process could be reversed if the Sands of Change clasp was repaired. I spent my fortune trying to find someone with the knowledge to fix it, but eventually it became too risky. That’s why I didn’t contact you when I learned you were alive—I was worried it would put Mrs. Bees in danger if anyone discovered what she was wearing around her neck.”

Valian scowled, his hands curling into fists.

“Amos Stirling knew more about the Great Uncommon Good than anyone,” Ivy said. “I bet he had a theory in his journal about how to fix the necklace. Mr. Punch must have read it before he gave it to me—*he* might be able to help us. We need to work out where Mrs. Bees and that dancer went.”

“It sounds like they took one of the engineering passages into the core of the mountain,” Mr. Rife said. “They all lead to the control center of the skymart.”

Ivy wondered how he knew so much about Strassa. She lowered her voice in Valian’s ear. “If we get close enough, I can use my whispering to track Mrs. Bees by listening for the broken soul inside the Sands of Change.”

“Good idea,” Valian agreed, getting to his feet. His mouth twitched as he looked back at Mr. Rife. “Will you be all right on your own?”

“I’ll be fine.” Mr. Rife gave him a weak smile, pushed a shaky hand inside his cape and withdrew the gold magnifying glass. “Hold this over your heart and it will amplify your abilities,” he explained, passing it to Ivy. He tapped his ear. “I’m a Sasspirit: we have exceptional hearing.”

—

Ivy, Seb, Valian and Judy entered the mountain via a craggy dark hole between the timber skeletons of two half-finished buildings. The pebbly tunnel floor sloped down, into darkness. They read a sign nailed to the rock:

RESTRICTED AREA
ALL VISITORS SHOULD BE EQUIPPED WITH
UNCOMMON NAIL CLIPPERS AND HARD HATS

The crackle of Judy’s roller skates reverberated around the mottled brown walls. The cool air carried the odor of damp clay. Ivy untied her coat from her waist and pulled it back on, her heart thudding in her rib cage. Despite her nerves, she was glad to move away from natural light and the increased danger of Octavius Wrench.

Judy rolled to a halt at a fork in the passageway. “This is where we lost Mrs. Bees and the dancer. Ivy, can you tell which way they went?”

Ivy broadened her field of sense. She caught the pleasant whisper of Judy’s broken soul and the voices of the uncommon objects they were all carrying, but the tunnels were vacant. “No, sorry,” she said. “Nothing yet.”

She lifted the uncommon magnifying glass over her chest, just as Mr. Rife had told her to do. The backs of her arms prickled as her senses spread farther. She winced as the gibbering voices of every fragment of soul, all the way to the jade temple, filled her head. “I think I can pinpoint the control center of Strassa, ahead of us,” she told the others in a strained voice. “It’s along the left-hand passageway. The other feels empty.” She concentrated a moment longer, trying to identify any individual voices. “I can’t isolate the Sands of Change yet. I’ll keep trying as we go, though.” There was no time to waste.

They jogged along the left-hand passageway, the blue-tinted glow from Valian’s uncommon trowel lighting the way. Soon the stony walls turned into gleaming steel panels, lit by uncommon lemon squeezers. A door labeled ENGINEER’S ENTRANCE appeared up ahead.

“We need to come up with a plan to get inside unnoticed,” Judy decided. “The facility might not be fully staffed, but there will be people working around the clock to keep Strassa running. If we’re seen, we’ll blow our chance of finding Rosie.”

Valian put his trowel away and patted his jacket pocket. “I can use my boat shoes to escape if I’m spotted, and Judy can use her camouflage,” he told Ivy and Seb, “but I don’t have any liquid shadow for you two.”

“I’ve got an idea for us,” Seb said, reaching into his hoodie pocket. “Only, it’ll require one of you two giving us a piggyback.”

“What do you mean?” Valian asked.

But Ivy knew exactly what her brother was thinking.

Not again…

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ivy stamped on the cotton lining of Valian’s outer top pocket, checking it was strong enough to hold her weight. The zipped opening was at neck height, so her head protruded above the top. As Valian turned a corner, she fell into Seb’s shoulder.

“Will you please hang on!” he snapped, gripping the zip pull. They were both about ten centimeters high—bigger than the last time they’d shrunk themselves using the measuring tape, but still the size of hamsters. “The last thing we need is for you to fall out and get hurt.”

“Sorry, but it’s difficult when I’m holding the magnifying glass over my heart,” she countered.

“Can you sense anything yet?”

She listened for broken souls in the surrounding area. “There are uncommon objects everywhere in this place, but none of them are the Sands of Change.” She communicated with Scratch, who relayed the information to Valian and Judy since she and Seb were too small to be heard naturally.

Valian continued along the corridor, holding Scratch close to his ear. Glass doors on either side led to empty offices. Judy offered them a wobbly smile of good luck before turning invisible. Ivy caught Valian’s reflection. He was wearing her satchel across his body, his ratty dark hair tucked behind his ears and his boat shoes fastened with fancy bows. Ivy and Seb looked like strange dolls sticking out of his top pocket.

Just then, light flickered at the end of the passageway. Before either Ivy or Seb could react, Valian darted through the nearest wall to avoid being seen. Ivy felt a cold, ticklish sensation all over her body, like silk gliding across her skin, and realized she was moving *through* the wall. She guessed the abilities of Valian's boat shoes extended to her and Seb also. Valian emerged into a large laboratory, where the strange shapes of machinery loomed all around and white coats hung on a hook beside the door. A shadow drew across the glass. Ivy and Seb bashed heads as Valian nose-dived behind a desk to hide.

The door creaked open and a tall woman in a green-and-silver skyguard uniform stepped in, brandishing her toilet brush. She scanned the gloom carefully. Ivy could feel Valian's heart racing, as fast as her own. Eventually the skyguard scowled and muttered something in Chinese before leaving. Ivy wished she could have understood. Valian took a deep breath, tossing Ivy and Seb forward.

"This is worse than hitching a ride on Johnny Hands's sneaker," Seb complained, rubbing his forehead. "Where are we?"

As if on cue, Valian rose to his feet and looked around. Hanging from a track on the ceiling were a dozen silver bells engraved with a fingerprint symbol—like the one used to ID Ivy at the entrance to Strassa. A robotic arm had its fingers frozen around the waist of one bell. Ivy followed the track across the ceiling and down the wall, where it passed over a large cylindrical vat. Valian climbed a stepladder beside it and peered over the rim.

The drum contained a transparent liquid.

Ivy wrinkled her nose as a chemical tang filled the air. "Is it just me, or does that smell like Alexander Brewster's Statue Salt to you?"

Seb scrutinized the identity bells. "It looks like they're coating the bells in the formula." He sniffed one of his drummer's gloves. "Yeah—they must be. I rang the bell when we were IDed with this hand, and it smells the same."

Ivy hurriedly passed the information on to Scratch, who explained it to Valian. "Hmm, Alexander mentioned that he'd given the Dirge several of his recipes," Valian said. "They must be behind this somehow; perhaps one of them works here. But why?"

Just then Judy shimmered into sight beside them. She looked flushed. She brushed a wisp of hair away from her nose.

“The bells have been coated—sabotaged, you could say—with one of Alexander Brewster’s concoctions,” Valian told her. “It turns people to living stone.”

“I know,” she replied in an ominous tone. “I found another lab just like this one on the other side of the hall. From the labels, the staff must think that the mixture is ever-shine polish. And that’s not all they’ve done.” She held up a wad of papers. The top sheet was printed with a list of numbered addresses. “I came across this in one of the office rooms. Last week, Strassa shipped these identity bells to every undermart in the world. That means anyone who has entered an undermart in the last seven days will have contaminated their gloves.”

The heavy clutches of dread fell around Ivy’s shoulders. “This has got to be part of New Dawn,” she told Seb. “It would only take the sound of an uncommon music box to turn the chemical on everyone’s gloves into powder, and then they’d freeze, like we did. The Dirge would be able to immobilize the majority of uncommoners in the world…”

“…meaning they could attack the common cities above without anyone trying to stop them,” Seb said. “Ivy, we can’t let that happen!”

The hairs on the back of Ivy’s neck stood to attention as an unsettling voice crept into her ears. It hummed somberly like a meditating monk, filling her with a deep feeling of emptiness. She knew immediately what it was.

“Findings Ivy the Sands of Change!” Scratch announced. “Is fast movings; hurry follow Scratch, please.”

In Scratch’s voice, Ivy directed Valian and Judy away from the laboratory, through a staff canteen, across a large atrium and out of the Strassa control center altogether. They had worked their way back to the mottled-brown rocky tunnels they’d started in when Ivy brought them to a stop. The broken soul inside the Sands of Change had settled in one position.

Ivy tried to pinpoint its location.

Strange…

It sounded like the object was *inside* the rocky wall just to the left of them. Ivy wondered if there was a secret chamber on the other side. She explained it via Scratch.

“I can try walking through it,” Valian said. “But just to warn you: I’ve never used the boat shoes to pass through something that thick before, so I don’t know what may happen.”

He took a deep breath before stepping forward. The cool, slippery feeling over Ivy’s skin lasted longer than before, but they eventually emerged into a dimly lit lounge. She tingled with relief, examining the Tudor-style beams running across the ceiling and the tapestries adorning the mahogany-paneled walls. The room was decorated in the style of an old English stately home. Logs had been laid in the cold fireplace, and the air smelled medicinal, like bitter herbs. Valian lifted Ivy and Seb down onto the ground so they could use the measuring tape to return to normal size.

“This is the right place,” Judy hissed, inspecting a brightly colored mask and costume dumped on a sofa in the center of the room. “This is the outfit that dancer was wearing.”

“I wonder where the real Midas is,” Seb said. “The Dirge must have gotten rid of them in order to assume their identity.”

Ivy fixed on the location of the Sands of Change as Valian handed her back her satchel. She could tell the necklace was close by. “This way,” she told the others.

They padded across the room toward a door in the far wall. Beyond it was a workbench scattered with uncommon equipment: crystal prisms, conical flasks, a Bunsen burner and an alchemist’s crucible. It didn’t exactly fit with the rest of Midas’s décor.

“This looks out of place; it has to belong to one of the Dirge,” Valian said in a hushed voice. A lab coat identical to the coats Ivy had seen hanging in the Strassa control center was draped over the back of a chair. “It’s all starting to make sense now,” he muttered bitterly. “After Octavius Wrench read our minds, he must have instructed another of the Dirge to hunt for Rosie and the Sands of Change. Somehow *they* discovered the truth about Mrs. Bees before we did and posed as Midas in order to lure Mrs. Bees and Mr. Rife away.” He nodded to the lab coat. “Maybe the Dirge member knew who Midas was because they work in the control center. That would explain how they were able to interfere with the bells.”

Ivy examined the items on the table. “Looks like they’ve already been trying to fix the clasp on the necklace,” she said. “Come on, the Sands of Change is behind that door.”

Seb and Valian positioned themselves, one on each side of the door. Behind the melancholy, droning voice of the Sands of Change, Ivy caught a faint whisper and identified the tapestry hanging beside the door as uncommon. “Careful,” she muttered as Seb brushed the fabric with his shoulder by mistake.

“Hang on,” he said, frowning. “There’s something behind this.” He heaved aside the wall hanging to reveal a gray stone door engraved with a crooked sixpence. Ivy tensed. It wasn’t the tapestry she’d sensed after all.

“It must lead to the Hexroom,” Seb decided. “But whose door is it?”

From her coat pocket, Ivy fetched the crooked sixpence that she’d picked up at the building site and flipped it over between her fingers. With every turn, a new face appeared. She recognized Monkshood’s scaly mask and the two pointed tusks of Blackclaw’s. After a few more turns she found the mask that matched the one carved on the stone door. “Judging by the design, I’d say it was…Hemlock.”

Valian’s nostrils flared. “I should have known it would be Hemlock behind this! Probably wants to finish what they started when they killed my parents.”

Just then, light flickered under the other doorway, and they heard a clatter of metallic objects. Ivy reached for her yo-yo. She wasn’t sure what to prepare for if they really were about to fight a member of the Dirge. They’d only survived their encounter with Monkshood at the summit of Breath Falls because he’d chosen to leave.

Valian nodded at everyone, and then flung the door open.

Ivy stared as she beheld the space beyond. She had never seen so many gold objects in all her life. Gleaming ornate swords and pistols decorated the walls; sparkling jewelry, coins and clocks were displayed in cabinets; military flags embroidered in gold thread hung from the ceiling; and a headless suit of gilded armor stood in one corner.

Mrs. Bees sat in a chair in the center of the room, her wrists fastened to the armrests with thin metallic wire. Light glowed around her, blinking on and off like an emergency beacon. With every flash of light, some aspect of Mrs. Bees was reverting to Rosie. Her dark hair tumbled down and went blond. Her skin darkened, and the wrinkles disappeared from her forehead and around her mouth. Her scowl smoothed into a wide-eyed look of fright, and her clothes sagged like a collapsed tent around her bony shoulders. She became so scrawny that she was soon able to try wriggling free from her paper clip shackles.

As she did so, a raven-haired person wearing a lab coat stepped forward, grabbed Rosie and retightened her bonds. For a split second, the aggressor's surgical gloves were peeled back in the struggle. Ivy caught sight of their shriveled, blistered hands—a deformity she had seen before, and it meant one thing:

They were a member of the Dirge.

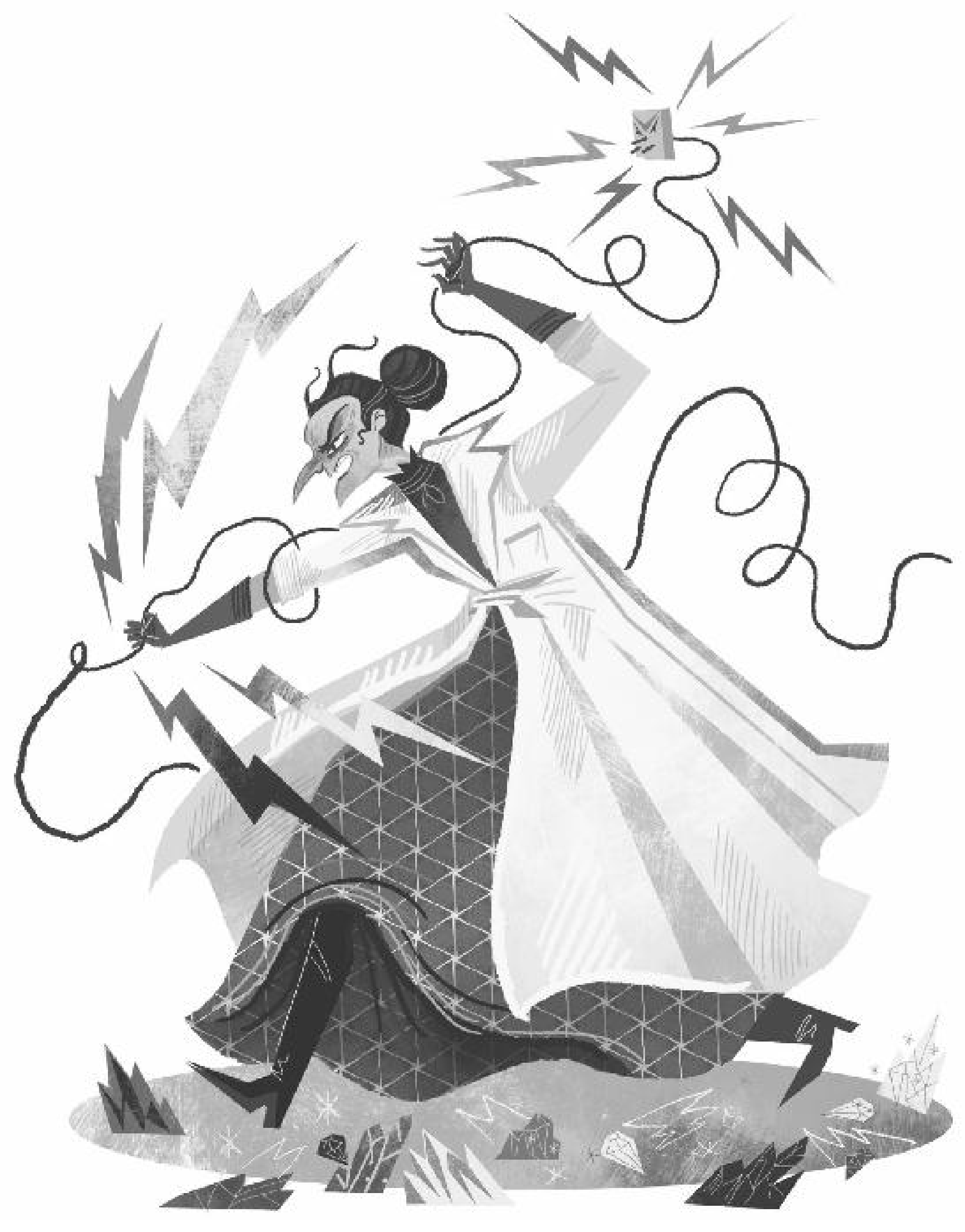
Just then, Valian barged through the doorway and charged in. "Get away from my sister!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Valian knocked Hemlock over and they both slammed into a case of jewelry. The glass front shattered, sending precious gems rolling across the floor.

Hemlock twitched. Ivy saw her face—a hawkish nose, pale blotchy skin and hooded brows. Her dark hair was scraped back into a taut bun. She bounced to her feet and pulled out the electric cord she'd used to attack Mr. Rife. Valian leaped back as she lashed it toward him. The metal claws in the plug tore splintering holes in the wooden boards.

Her voice, however, was soft and sweet. "Stay where you are," she warned, moving to Rosie, who was still strapped to the chair. She held the plug threateningly close to Rosie's trembling chest. The claws splayed with the sound of a knife being sharpened.



Rosie’s cheeks were wet with tears, her eyes drawn so wide it looked to Ivy as though she was seeing the world for the first time. “Valian?” she squeaked.

“Rosie, it’s me,” he said, his eyes shining. “Don’t worry.”

Ivy hoped Valian had a plan. Judy used her camouflage to disappear; Seb was frozen, a drumstick in either hand, waiting to see what would happen.

"Come any closer and I'll kill her," Hemlock assured them calmly.

Ivy couldn't sense any broken soul within her, so Hemlock must be alive.

"I have no use for the girl, now that I have this," she explained. Dangling from Hemlock's free hand was the Sands of Change. The pendant was just as Ivy had seen it in Rosie's photo—a black crystal set in a silver mount. The rope chain was unfastened, the clasp undone.

"Leave her alone," Valian growled, his face contorting with anger.

Hemlock leered. "Or you'll do what? You are no match for me, especially in this room." She signaled with her surgical gloves to the hoard of golden objects on display.

Ivy broadened her senses. Almost every item present was uncommon—from the jeweled crowns and trophies, to the gold bars and Olympic medals. She had a bad feeling that they would all have unfriendly powers.

"Your parents defied me," Hemlock continued. "You don't want to make the same mistake."

"You murdered them…" Valian's voice fractured. Ivy noticed him squeezing something behind his back.

"Yes," Hemlock declared, lifting her pointed chin. "Even after a dose of tongueweed, they couldn't tell me where the Sands of Change was. It wasn't till they were dead that I finally believed their assertion that they'd lost it through carelessness."

Valian was shaking. "They were my mum and dad!"

Ivy curled her hands into fists, liquid welling in her eyes. Valian's pain was written across his entire body.

"They were in my way," Hemlock replied simply. "I would have poisoned you and your sister also, but your parents wrestled the hemlock away from me and drank the last of it. So you see, there was nothing left to leave as a trap for you."

Tears streamed down Valian's cheeks. Ivy wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around him, but she didn't dare move. At least Valian knew now that his parents' death hadn't been for nothing: they had died to save him and Rosie.

“Now, let’s see if this device is correctly mended, shall we?” Hemlock fastened the clasp of the necklace and then swiveled the pendant once clockwise. A beam of shifting sand about the width of a broomstick shot out of it, glowing with golden light. Within the swirling dust, Ivy recognized the shapes of Chinese characters. Hemlock angled the pendant so that the beam moved across the floor toward Seb. Where it touched the boards, it left behind a bizarre trail of changes. In some places the wood appeared rotten or burned; in others it became metal or glass.

Without warning, Judy materialized over Hemlock’s shoulder and snatched the Sands of Change from her grasp. Hemlock jerked with surprise and lashed her electric cord, but Judy dodged the flailing plug before vanishing again.

It took the others a moment to react.

Then Seb smashed his drumsticks and Hemlock was thrown into the headless suit of armor in the corner of the room. Valian ran to Rosie, wrapped his arms around her, and then hurriedly began removing both their shoes. Ivy had seconds to formulate a plan. She couldn’t risk using her yo-yo: a room full of flying golden weapons would be as dangerous for themselves as it would be for Hemlock.

Cackling with amusement, Hemlock pushed herself upright. There was a fresh cut across her cheek. “OK, little lambs. If you really want to fight…”

At her feet, the disassembled pieces of the ancient suit of armor convulsed and reshaped themselves into the body of a huge golden beast. Four strong legs, a barbed tail and two clawed wings formed in quick succession. The individual leaves of gilded metal became scales, covering the belly of a headless medieval dragon.

Ivy edged back as the dragon stretched its wings. Cold sweat trickled down the back of her neck. She saw Rosie move her hands free of her restraints as if they were made of nothing more than wet tissue paper. Valian’s boat shoes were fastened to her feet. *Ingenious!* He’d used them to enable Rosie to pass through the unbreakable wire in the same way they allowed him to pass through walls.

With a flick of her wrist, Hemlock turned on them, striking the ground with her electric cable whip. Valian jumped aside and lobbed a bath plug into the air. Ivy had seen him wield one before; when activated, they behaved like tiny black holes, sucking in all matter for a short amount of time.

Where the plug landed, a crack of darkness opened and began dragging everything toward it. Ivy dodged aside as a rapier sprang free of its fastenings and sliced through the air on its way toward the maelstrom. She went to grab the edge of a table to stop herself sliding forward —*“Humph…”* —and received a blow to the ribs from the dragon’s tail, which sent her spinning.

Her satchel fell open and Scratch bowled onto the floorboard. “Watch out, Ivys!” he cried.

Before she could roll aside, a fan of daggers came loose from the wall above and careered toward her, points first. She shielded her head with her arms as they stabbed the floor all around, sounding like a battering ram. Shaking with fear she waited for one to strike, but, miraculously, she didn’t feel a thing.

When she looked again, she saw Judy’s bright face hanging over her, wincing. Two daggers had stuck in her ribs and shoulder, but she wasn’t bleeding. There was no time to say thank you, as, just then, Valian cried out in pain. Ivy got to her feet as Judy hurried over to help, the Sands of Change swinging in her grasp.

The bath plug black hole had vanished. The room filled with the repeated crash of metal as Seb battled the headless dragon in one corner and Valian defended Rosie from Hemlock in the other. But, as Judy ran, the tip of the dragon’s wing caught her in the arm with enough force that the Sands of Change was knocked from her hand. Ivy watched the necklace fly across the room almost in slow motion. The pendant spun clockwise and the flowing stream of sand burst from inside.

First it passed over the headless dragon, which clattered to the floor in a pile of lifeless armor.

Next Judy leaped to catch the necklace, but the shaft of glowing dust touched her, and the pendant rotated yet again. She rolled away, apparently unscathed.

Finally the sandy beam fell onto Scratch, and the pendant rotated twice more. Ivy threw herself toward him, but, when she got there, the bell had gone and a scrawny little boy with gray eyes and freckles had taken its place. A large white scar ran from his left temple up into his light brown hair. “Ivy?” he asked in Scratch’s high-pitched voice. “What be happenings?”

Ivy wobbled. *“Scratch?”*

Overhead, there came a loud *whoosh* like the blades of a fan, and they saw the necklace had become tangled in the ribbon of a medal hanging from the ceiling. The dangerous beam of sand spun around the room, creating havoc. It missed Ivy by a few centimeters as it glided over Scratch once more. With a little shriek he vanished, and a bicycle bell reappeared in his place.

Ripping the necklace down, Valian turned the pendant counterclockwise, shutting off the beam of sand. But in doing so he’d left Rosie unguarded….

“Give the necklace to me or I’ll kill your sister!” Hemlock was holding Rosie tightly around her shoulders, the jagged claws of the three-pronged plug lifted to her throat.

Ivy gripped Seb’s hand. She could feel him shaking, but both of them stayed silent.

“Don’t do it, Valian!” Rosie squealed. Her voice was determined, but her face shone with fear.

Valian’s body was like stone, his expression unreadable. Ivy had no idea what he was going to do. He’d be protecting thousands of lives if he kept the necklace—including those of her own parents—but he’d also lose the sister he’d spent almost half his life looking for. An impossible choice. Ivy felt her heart might tear in two, whatever he chose to do.

“I…I’m sorry,” he muttered, glancing at Ivy, Seb and Judy. He carefully unfastened the clasp of the Sands of Change before throwing it to Hemlock, where it landed by the foot of her lab coat. With Rosie still locked in one arm, she bent down and scooped up the necklace in her free hand.

“Now let Rosie go,” Valian demanded.

Hemlock snickered and held the plug claws closer to Rosie. “Foolish children, just like your parents!”

“PUT THE CHILD DOWN!” bellowed a voice from over Ivy’s shoulder.

She turned to see Mr. Rife standing in the doorway. With his head down, he bull-charged Hemlock, grimacing through the pain in his leg.

There was a creak and a slam. When Ivy looked up again, Rosie was collapsed in a heap on the floor, sobbing.

But Hemlock and the Sands of Change were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Valian threw his arms around Rosie, both of them sobbing so hard they were shaking. Deciding to give them some privacy, Ivy and the others rushed over to check on Mr. Rife.

“Are you all right?” Ivy asked as Seb and Judy helped him sit up against a wall. The dark patch of blood on his trousers had grown bigger.

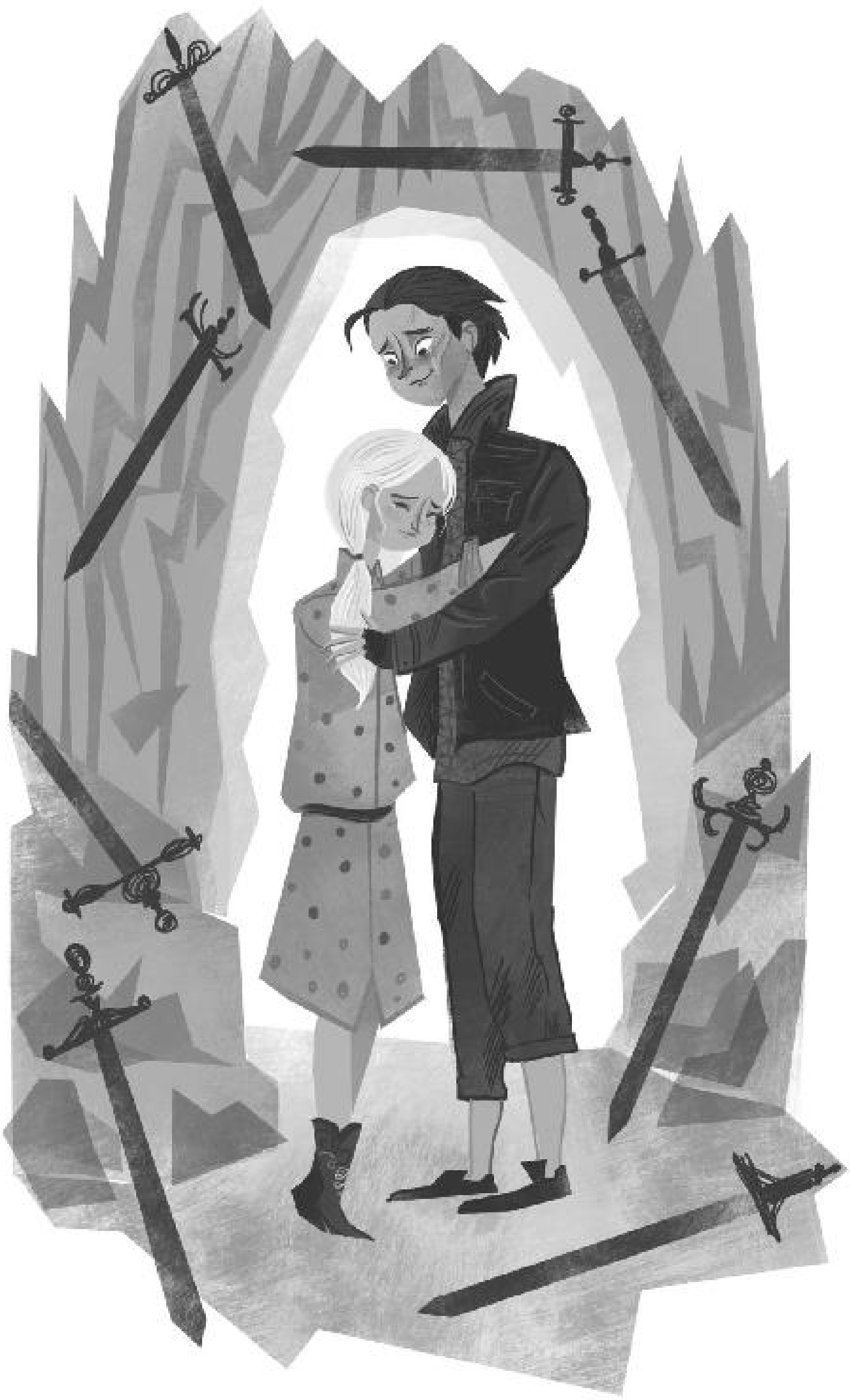
“I’ll be fine,” he replied. His gaze flicked to Rosie. “She’s OK?”

“Yes, thanks to you,” Seb told him. “I don’t think Hemlock would have released Rosie if you hadn’t charged in. How did you know where to find us?”

“I discovered a cufflink in my pram,” Mr. Rife croaked. “I assumed one of you was carrying the other, so I was able to locate you.” He took a few deep breaths, still staring at Rosie. “I…hadn’t really considered what it would mean to have Rosie back and Mrs. Bees gone. I’d grown quite fond of the old woman really. If it wasn’t for her, the reputation of my business would still be in tatters.”

Ivy remembered what Valian had uncovered during his research on Forward & Rife’s auction house. It must have been thanks to Mrs. Bees that they’d stopped making false claims about the items they were selling.

At the sound of sniffling, Ivy turned to see Valian and Rosie approaching, holding hands. Rosie looked just like her picture, except older—as scrawny as her brother but shorter, with sloping cheekbones and deep-set dark eyes. Using the belt from Valian’s jeans, she’d fashioned Mrs. Bees’s oversized shirt into a dress. Her shiny ice-blond hair appeared gold as it reflected all the objects in the room.



“Thanks for saving me,” she said, wiping her nose on the back of her arm. “Valian told me you’re all his friends.”

Ivy smiled. “It’s great to meet you at last, Rosie. I’m Ivy. This is my brother, Seb, and this is our friend Judy.”

“Hi,” Judy said. Seb waved gingerly.

“And this is Mr. Rife,” Ivy said cautiously.

“Hello again, Rosie,” Mr. Rife rasped. He raised a shaky glove to Rosie’s face, but she backed away. The lines around his eyes deepened.

“It’s all right,” Valian reassured her. “This is the man who looked after you while you were lost.” Ivy, guessing Rosie didn’t remember much of the last six years, smiled encouragingly.

Rosie shuffled closer, curious. “I know your face,” she said softly. She held his fingers to her cheek. “You’re hurt. You need to be treated at a hospital.”

“She’s right,” Valian said, assessing Mr. Rife’s wound. “We’ve got to get you up and get you back to the main part of Strassa right away.” He bent down and lifted Mr. Rife under his shoulders, hugging him around his middle to help him to his feet. Ivy pondered if that was the very snapshot Mr. Punch had seen in the face of the uncommon clock.

They emerged from the side of the mountain a short while later, Seb supporting Mr. Rife under one arm as he limped along. Ivy squinted at the blue sky through Strassa’s shimmering dome. The defiant afternoon sun warmed her face and neck, although her insides felt cold. The Dirge were now in possession of the Sword of Wills *and* the Sands of Change. She wasn’t sure if anyone was powerful enough to stop them now that they had two of the Great Uncommon Good.

She looked from face to face around her as the five of them traipsed back through the building site. No one had spoken since leaving Midas’s gold-filled room. In the quiet, her mind had filled with worries about the fate of her parents and of everyone else in London.

Valian and Rosie trudged a little way off from everyone else, Valian with his head lowered. Ivy wanted to tell him that she didn’t blame him for giving the Sands of Change to Hemlock—she would have done the same thing had it been Seb’s life under threat—but she thought it better to give him and Rosie some space.

Weird beings in squidgy body was, Scratch said in Ivy’s head.

Opening her satchel, she brought him out into the sunshine. “Do you feel OK?” she asked.

“Like strange dream happened,” he said, “not back yet to normals.”

Ivy couldn’t get the image of Scratch as a little boy out of her mind. He’d been dressed in metallic-gray jeans and a T-shirt with an orange-and-white logo—the same colors he sported as a bell. She thought of all the instances when his quick thinking had saved her life or when his words had filled her with courage. And yet she'd never realized before just how young he was.

"It might take a while," she reassured him, "but you'll feel better eventually."

She deliberated how the pendant in the Sands of Change worked. It had rotated twice while focused on Scratch, transforming him from a bell into a human, but that hadn't been all….

"I…" She hesitated. While Scratch had transformed, she hadn't been able to sense him. "Your broken soul wasn't inside you back there, Scratch. Was it made whole? Were you alive?"

He went quiet for a moment. "Thinkings so me yes; Scratch never knowings it was possible."

Ivy gazed over at Judy, who was skating ahead. She realized with a jolt that she couldn't sense Judy's soul anymore either.

Light to darkness, life to death…

The words in Amos's journal certainly rang true. Judy was alive, Ivy was sure of it. She didn't understand why Judy hadn't told anyone yet, but Ivy knew that it wasn't *her* information to share. She held Scratch to her chest, giving him a hug. She'd never once considered if he minded being a bell or if he'd prefer to be a human boy. As she tucked him back into her bag she decided that, when this was all over, they'd talk about it and she'd help him with whatever he wanted.

"Ivy," Mr. Rife wheezed, struggling to fetch something from the pocket of his crushed velvet jacket. "Please, give this to Rosie. I want her to have it."

Ivy helped him pull out a familiar silver object. "The Frozen Telescope—"

"There's so much for Rosie to understand," Mr. Rife said sadly. "By looking through the device, she'll be able to see everything that's happened to Mrs. Bees these past seven years."

As Ivy carried the telescope over to Rosie, she considered how crucial it had been in their search for her. If Valian hadn't peered through it three days ago, they never would have learned the truth about the Sands of Change, and none of this would have happened.

Rosie gazed up at Valian, listening carefully as he explained how the telescope worked. Ivy liked watching the two of them together. It was obvious how much Rosie idolized her big brother, and in her company Valian seemed more relaxed. There was a playful, easy swagger to his walk that Ivy had never seen before.

But when they reached the edge of the construction zone, an alarm sounded, wailing like an old World War II air-raid siren. The timber building frames rattled, and the dome overhead turned an alarming shade of red, transforming the sandy roads into Martian earth. An announcement crackled over a loudspeaker, first in Chinese and then translated into English: “STRASSA IS IN LOCKDOWN DUE TO AN INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCY. All guests are to remain inside the protective domes for safety.”

The red light of the dome flashed, making Ivy’s temples ache.

“Something’s happened,” Valian said, pulling on Rosie’s hand as he sped up. “Come on!”

As they reached the main part of Strassa, they saw skyguards lining the streets, directing people inside buildings and helping stallholders lock up. Yurt flaps were being rolled down; music was replaced with nervous chatter. Judy made a hasty trade at an uncommon button stall before it shut. She brought back two buttons and popped them both in Mr. Rife’s jacket pocket. “One to help heal the wound, the other to soothe the pain,” she explained briefly. “They’ll have to do for now because we don’t have time to visit the hospital.” (Ivy had been treated by uncommon buttons before and knew there was a different button for every ailment. You only had to tuck them in your pocket for them to take effect.) Mr. Rife nodded to Judy in thanks.

Valian scanned the road and fixed his gaze on a group of skyguards. “Something’s happening to all the skyguards,” he said in an unsteady voice. “Look, their bodies are going rigid.”

Ivy examined their faces. Their eyes had glazed over.

“They look like you did when you were under the influence of the Sword of Wills,” Seb observed.

Ivy grabbed the magnifying glass from her pocket and held it over her heart, using her whispering to listen hard. “Neither the Sands of Change nor the Sword of Wills is here,” she said. “The Dirge must be controlling the skyguards from somewhere else in the world….How is that possible?”

“The powers of the Great Uncommon Good are limited only by the user’s knowledge of them,” Mr. Rife croaked. “If Blackclaw has read and understood the directions in Amos Stirling’s journal, he will be able to control the minds of anyone, even across oceans.”

There was a loud crackle and another announcement sounded over the loudspeaker. This time, the voice was strained, making Ivy wonder whether the announcer was under the control of the Sword of Wills too: “THIS IS A SECURITY UPDATE. A dangerous criminal has been discovered masquerading as a quartermaster in Lundinor, in the United Kingdom. Underguards have been dispatched to arrest one Mr. Punch. ALL UNCOMMONERS WILL BE PLACED IN TEMPORARY PARALYSIS IMMEDIATELY. This measure is being taken for your own safety and will last until the criminal, Mr. Punch, has been detained. PLEASE REMAIN CALM. You will be released from your paralysis once our work is complete."

"What?" Ivy exclaimed. "Mr. Punch? No—they've got it all wrong!"

The air rippled as several giant materializers dropped from the sky and hovered into positions where all the remaining uncommoners in the street could see them. The same video image appeared on every one: a figure in a black suit and bowler hat standing in a moonlit field. His face was masked by the shadows of the surrounding trees, but Ivy knew who it was immediately. She gritted her teeth as he started speaking.

"As of this moment, every undermart in the world is under the Dirge's control," Octavius Wrench announced triumphantly. "We are the pioneers of a new future for uncommon-kind, a future that will see commoners submit to our superior wisdom and technology…or *die*."

Before anyone could make any comment, the tinkling melody of a music box began seeping out of the loudspeaker…and wisps of noxious dust burst from everyone's gloves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Everyone, take your gloves off, NOW!" Seb shouted, ripping open the Velcro tabs around his knuckles. "The Statue Salt will start seeping from the material. We'll only be affected by it if we breathe it in."

Ivy pulled on the cotton fingers of her dress gloves, scrunched them into a ball and lobbed them several meters away. Valian and Judy did the same with their gloves; Rosie helped Mr. Rife remove his. A puff of white powder arose from where they hit the ground.

All around in the street, pale dust motes swirled into traders' faces. Coughing and spluttering, they wiped at their mouths and clawed at their throats. Some people stiffened within seconds; others got as far as running a few paces before their legs locked. Ivy saw a mother go to grab her young son before freezing in midair with her face caught in a wide-mouthed expression of terror. As the air clouded with Statue Salt, the only people left moving were the skyguards, who looked on impassively.

"We need to get as far away from here as possible," Ivy said, covering her nose and mouth with her bare hands. "We can return to the construction zone—there's no one there, which means there are no gloves covered in Statue Salt. The air there will be cleaner."

They turned and sprinted back the way they'd come. Valian and Seb each shouldered one half of Mr. Rife's weight, helping him hobble as fast as he could. A veil of Statue Salt had developed over the rooftops of Strassa, obscuring the sky through the red dome. Ivy listened to the eerie tune of the music box and knew that, in every undermart around the world, at that very moment, adults and children were being paralyzed. She remembered the sickening panic she'd felt at Guesthouse Swankypants as her limbs had gone numb. People would be terrified.

"Look out! There's a patch of Statue Salt ahead," Valian cried. "I can't see a way around it." A haze of the deadly powder lingered across their path, seeping into the shells of unfinished buildings. Two traders stood immobile by a cement mixer at the roadside. The path behind them sloped upward; beyond them, the air looked clear. "We'll have to hold our breaths and run through it," Valian decided.

Ivy filled her lungs with clean air before charging ahead….

"Argh!" On the other side, Judy fell to the ground, wincing. "One of my knees has gone solid—I can't move it!" She tried dragging herself forward, but her bad knee was like an anchor, weighing her leg down.

Seb left Mr. Rife with Valian so he could help Judy up. "It's a good thing you're on wheels," he said, gripping her around the waist. He went behind her and pushed, rolling her over the gritty road.

Together, they all ran, hobbled and skated into a clear area of the construction zone. Standing atop a small hill was a partially painted Chinese pagoda. It had a square base and seven gradually tapering tiered eaves. These supported a cobalt blue roof that came to a thorny point at each corner. Ivy speculated that the structure was destined for use as a featherlight mailhouse, as there were small holes in the walls for feathers to fly in and out of, just like the wobbly brick tower in Lundinor.

"Let's stop here," Valian wheezed, hauling Mr. Rife into a seated position at the base of the pagoda. "The one good thing about this Statue Salt is that you can't miss it: we'll be able to see any approaching clouds from this height."

"It's only a matter of time before one of us inhales enough of Alexander's formula to paralyze our entire body," Seb pointed out, leaning Judy against a wall. "We need to find a way to protect ourselves and free all these other people."

That's not our only problem. Ivy thought of Mr. Punch; somebody had to help him, and their parents, and all the other citizens of London.

"When Alexander Brewster used the Statue Salt on us, he said that its effect could be reversed if the victims listened to an uncommon music box played backward," Valian recalled. "There's probably a few for sale in

Strassa, but there’s no way to trade for them now. And it’ll be the same in every other undermart.”

Ivy had a sudden inspiration. “There was an uncommon music box on display at your auction house,” she reminded Mr. Rife. “It used to belong to Queen Victoria.”

He nodded. “I know the one. Mrs. Bees and I—” He shook his head. “Sorry, I mean *Rosie* and I didn’t pack away the sale items before leaving. That music box will be right where we left it in the garden.”

“I’ve been in an undermart in lockdown before,” Valian shared. “All methods of uncommon transport stop operating; every border and possible exit is monitored by underguards. Even the movements of the dead are restricted. I don’t know how we’d get to Nubrook to fetch it.”

Ivy racked her brains, trying to come up with something. By the empty looks on everyone else’s faces, they were just as stumped as she was.

“I’m afraid leaving this place under lockdown will be about as easy as finding a fresh-smelling selkie,” Mr. Rife remarked, rubbing his bad thigh. “Perhaps we could get a message to someone in Nubrook who can retrieve the box for us?”

*A fresh-smelling selkie…*Ivy had heard that turn of phrase before. She reached for Scratch with her whispering: *Didn’t Mr. Farrow write that in the guide to Nubrook?*

Certainlys did, the bell replied in her head. *Need Scratch readings again?*

No, it’s OK. Ivy recalled what Mr. Rife had told them: that he’d helped Rosie because he was an orphan too…just like Mr. Farrow. Now that she considered it, there were quite a lot of similarities between the auctioneer and the travel writer who went under the pseudonym “Frederick Ignacio Farrow”…They both traveled a lot. They both knew a great deal about Strassa. They both were dead….

Perhaps, Ivy thought, *Mrs. Bees isn’t the only one who’s been fostering a secret identity….*

“Mr. Rife, do you know Frederick Ignacio Farrow at all?” Ivy questioned.

Mr. Rife tilted his head, a coy smile on his face. “Ah, what gave it away—the anagram?”

“Anagram?”

Jumbly letters, Scratch said. *Forward & Rife beings Fred I. Farrow.*

Ivy understood Scratch's meaning: minus the ampersand, the letters of "Forward" and "Rife" could be rearranged to spell—

"*You* are Fred I. Farrow!" Ivy cried.

"There aren't many people who know," Mr. Rife admitted. "The guides are given away free, so the auction business is my real livelihood. It makes sense as we travel…" He paused, and a wide grin broke across his face. "What am I *saying*? There *is* a way for us to get to Nubrook!"

Valian stepped closer. "There is?"

"My uncommon pram should be right where I left it, not two minutes from here," Mr. Rife said. "It will allow us to journey to Nubrook, but it only carries two. Everyone else will have to take their chances in Strassa."

From the conviction in Mr. Rife's voice, Ivy gathered that he had successfully used his pram in a similar situation before. She was about to volunteer for the mission when he cleared his throat. "I'll go. I'm the only one with access to the auction house. I'll have to be careful that no underguards spot me moving around. You should all head into the mountain. Hopefully you'll have a better chance of avoiding the Statue Salt from in there."

"You're too injured to operate the pram on your own," Rosie said, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. "I remember what to do. You and I've made hundreds of journeys together. I'll come with you." She turned to Valian. "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing, I'll be fine."

Ivy caught a flicker of worry on Valian's face, but he nodded.

"OK, that settles it," Mr. Rife said, lifting his chest and taking a shaky breath. "We'll be as quick as we can."

Rosie hugged Valian tightly. "Stay safe." And with a solemn nod, Mr. Rife and Rosie left.

Fear gripped at Ivy's chest as she, Seb, Valian and Judy hurried toward the tunnel that burrowed into the mountain. "It's going to be OK," she told everyone. "For all we know, Johnny Hands, Curtis and the rest of the Tidemongers are working on getting everything back to normal as we speak." Truthfully, however, she had never felt so uncertain about anything. She glanced at Valian, who was scowling so hard she decided that he might be trying to stop himself from crying. It must have been so difficult for him to let Rosie go after he'd just found her again.

“Everything the Dirge have done so far has been to neutralize their enemies,” Seb remarked, pushing Judy into the mouth of the tunnel. “Anyone who might try to fight them—the underguards, and now Mr. Punch—is powerless. There’s no one left to prevent New Dawn.”

“If all the broken souls inside Mr. Punch weren’t arguing, he would be able to stop them,” Ivy said. “I wish we could help him.”

“Me too,” Judy agreed. “But there’s no other way to get to Lundinor from here.”

As they advanced down the tunnel, Ivy sensed they were approaching a large collection of uncommon objects on their left. They turned a corner and she recognized a crumbling hole in the rock. It was where they had all broken out of Midas’s gold-filled chamber using Seb’s drumsticks after they had rescued Rosie. Under the surface of the speckled tan stone was a layer of brick wall. A gentle whirring noise sounded within as the swords, jewelry and trophies left over from their battle with Hemlock stirred.

Ivy had a thought—“Maybe there is a way to travel out of here,” she blurted. “If we can get into the Hexroom, we could use Ragwort’s door, which opens onto the featherlight mailhouse in Lundinor.”

“Ivy, you’re right!” Valian’s face brightened. “If we’re quick, we might be able to prevent Mr. Punch’s arrest.”

They stopped where they were. Seb withdrew his drumsticks and moved toward the opening. Judy tried to follow, but her bad leg wouldn’t budge. “I’ll have to stay here,” she said. “You’re on your own.”

“Why don’t you try vanishing and then coming back?” Seb suggested. “Your knee might return to normal that way.”

“I…” Judy hesitated. “I can’t.” Very slowly, she looked over at Ivy. “Do you know?”

Ivy nodded. “Yes, I can sense it.”

“I didn’t want to say anything,” Judy explained. “It seemed too good to be true.”

“What did?” Seb asked. “What’s going on?”

Judy fixed him with a stare, her eyes glistening. “While we were fighting Hemlock, I got caught by the Sands of Change….” She took a deep breath. “I’m alive, Seb. Living, heart beating, the works.”

“What—” Seb assessed Judy from her messy braids right down to her vintage roller skates. “Seriously?”

Her lip wobbled; a smile spread through her entire face. “Seriously. I’m not a phantom anymore. I’m just a girl.”

His jaw dropped. “That’s…brilliant!” As he threw his arms around her, Judy blushed. Ivy noticed her patting her cheeks, sensing the blood under the surface of her skin. She guessed blushing must feel different when you’re dead.

Valian gave Judy a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Really glad to hear you’ve left planet zombie, but we need to hurry,” he said, not unkindly.

Ivy stuffed her yo-yo in her pocket before handing her satchel to Judy.

“Judy really needs a friend right now,” she told Scratch as she stroked him goodbye. “You have to stay here and help her.”

“Doings best will Scratch,” he promised. “Ivy’s stay safe?”

“I’ll do my best too.”

They traipsed through the messy remains of Midas’s room, stepping over the shattered glass and dented pieces of golden armor. Valian shoved open Hemlock’s door to the Hexroom with surprising ease, considering it had been impossible to move from the other side, and they went in. They crossed the Hexroom and stood facing Ragwort’s wooden door.

Seb laughed nervously. “What’s so funny?” Ivy hissed. Her nerves were pulsing through her skin; she could do with a joke to relax her.

He shrugged. “I was just thinking—if the Dirge haven’t killed us by the time this is all over…I’m actually gonna have to ask Judy out on a date. I don’t know what’s more terrifying.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Lundinor will be a hostile place if Mr. Punch has already been arrested," Valian warned, curling his fingers around the handle of Ragwort's splintered wooden door. "We've got to be prepared for anything."

Ivy squeezed her yo-yo. With a long creak, Ragwort's door swung open, revealing the shadowy interior of Lundinor's featherlight mailhouse beyond. The curved walls were made of the same gray ashlar as those in Mr. Punch's Curiosity Shop. Floor-to-ceiling shelves held jars of every imaginable kind of feather. Ivy read the labels of some of them as she ventured in: SPECIAL DELIVERY FLAMINGO and ULTRA-FAST FALCON caught her notice.

The air was cool and damp, as if it had just been raining. Valian emptied a pot of feathers labeled CHRISTMAS GREETINGS ROBIN and wedged it between Ragwort's door and the doorframe—just in case they needed to make a speedy exit.

"Ready?" Seb asked, pausing by the door that opened into Lundinor.

Ivy could hear the wind whistling outside, rattling the hinges. She steadied her nerves as the door flew wide.

"No way." Seb's voice was soft.

Unable to believe what she was seeing, Ivy followed him out in a trance. What had once been a paved square bordered by cafés was now a grassy mound sloping down to the banks of a lake.

Lundinor had been *flooded.* Green islands poked through the murky water as far as the eye could see. Some were crowned by stone castles and connected by wooden bridges; others stood isolated in the thick mist, covered in forest. Ivy spotted the crumbling arches of a ruined abbey on one hill and a huge stone circle on another. She remembered then that a battered copy of *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* had been lying open on top of the Stone of Dreams: Lundinor had transformed into a version belonging to a mythical England of old.

Other than a few boats bobbing in the reeds and a line of swallow-tailed pennants waving from distant battlements, the place was still and quiet. Over her shoulder Ivy glimpsed the featherlight mailhouse, which now formed the wobbly turret of a medieval fortress. A wooden sign erected on the drawbridge listed the names of shops and restaurants you could find inside the courtyard. The portcullis was down; there was no one around.

"I've never been in Lundinor when it's closed," Valian admitted. "I'd guess the only people here would be underguards and a handful of officials, but stay alert all the same."

Seb examined a map on the side of the featherlight mail tower. It was constructed from odds and ends of string, rubbish, plastic bags and random objects used to represent different landmarks. "If I'm reading this correctly, Mr. Punch's Curiosity Shop should be"—he moved his thumb between the strange map on the wall and the green island in the distance—"in that castle over there. The one with the red bunting."

Ivy squinted through the mist. Sure enough, she spotted Mr. Punch's symbol—a black top hat—on the flags. "How are we going to get over there? It's not as if we can hire a mop from a sky driver."

"Look, down there." Valian pointed to a small wooden rowboat, anchored in the weeds at the lake's edge. They clambered down as quietly as they could and climbed in. Seb took the oars. As they moved through the water, Ivy gazed at the empty market city.

"This place is seriously creepy," Seb muttered, scanning the shadows as he rowed. Only the splash of the oars broke the silence. Valian opened his leather jacket and they saw inside the pale light of his glowing trowel, which meant, Ivy knew, that it was sensing the presence of the dead.

"We're not alone," Valian whispered. "There must be races of the dead lurking nearby. We need to keep our voices down. If we're discovered, we'll have no chance of saving Mr. Punch."

Ivy pushed her whispering senses as far as she could, using the magnifying glass to increase her reach. An overwhelming number of voices darted into her ears, making her jump. It felt as if she was standing in a huge crowd, with everyone talking through a loudspeaker. A shooting pain coursed down to her eardrum, and she had to lower the magnifying glass away from her heart. "The dead are congregated inside the castles," she said, wincing. "I've never sensed so many together in one place before. They've got to be part of the Dirge's army."

"Great." The oars vibrated in Seb's hands. "Anyone else thinking we should have stayed with Judy in Strassa?"

They moored the boat under the drawbridge of the castle where Mr. Punch's Curiosity Shop was located. Ivy attempted to sense him, but, with so many of the dead around, it was difficult to isolate one set of souls, and too painful to listen for any length of time.

"From what we saw in the discocommunicator, that could be Mr. Punch's shop," Valian said, signaling to a tower at one corner of the castle. Ivy studied the squat, circular stone structure. It was the right size and shape, and the positions of the arrow slits in the walls would offer a similar view to the one Ivy had seen in the discocommunicator hologram. Underguards in swishing black cloaks and three-cornered hats patrolled up and down the ramparts, their expressions blank.

"They're still under the control of the Sword of Wills," Seb murmured. "We can't just knock and expect them to lower the drawbridge. How are we going to get in?"

"Did you bring your tape measure?" Ivy asked in a hushed voice. "I've got an idea."

They waded as quietly as they could through the shallows of the moat, using the tall reeds and grasses for cover. Ivy checked with her whispering until they reached a part of the castle wall with no dead around; Seb climbed up on the bank, his tape measure in his hands. He frowned at Ivy, a grim expression on his face. "Are you sure about this?"

"The tape measure has the power to resize things, to make them not just smaller but bigger too," she said. "We skipped backward to grow smaller, so, theoretically, if we skip forward…"

“OK, OK, I get the idea.” Seb flicked his wrists and sent the tape flying up behind him, over his head, toward his toes. On the first jump, his head bulged like it was a balloon being inflated. His cheeks turned chubby and his feet swelled.

On the second, his legs grew taller, as if he was wearing stilts.

“It’s working,” Ivy whispered to Valian. “He won’t be able to stay that size for long or he’ll be seen. We have to be quick.”

She and Valian crawled out of the water. Once Seb was around twenty feet tall, they climbed onto his sweaty hand, and he lifted them up to one of the battlements. Lowering their heads below the embrasures, they scurried along to Mr. Punch’s tower. The door to the shop was already wide open. Ivy couldn’t sense any dead within the immediate vicinity, so they sneaked inside. Mr. Punch was nowhere to be seen, but there were no signs that there had been a struggle. The room and all its contents appeared the same as when Ivy had seen them in the hologram of the discocommunicator.

“Perhaps he fled before they could arrest him,” Valian said hopefully. “The Stone of Dreams has gone too.”

They heard some shuffling outside and hurried to one of the arrow slits. A small group of underguards was assembled down in the courtyard, just in front of the gatehouse. Two of them were guarding the Stone of Dreams, while another three detained Mr. Punch. Ivy could see him flicking between several appearances, faster and more out of control than ever. She tried to catch what his different guises were saying to each other, but they were changing too fast.

“Is that who I think it is?” Valian said, squinting.

“The souls within Mr. Punch are panicked,” she told him. “It’s as if none of them wants to relinquish control, rendering all of them powerless.”

Valian rubbed his chin. “The underguards can’t realize he’s Mr. Punch, or else there would be more of them here to apprehend him. No one else knows he’s a Hob, do they?”

Ivy shook her head; as far as she knew, it was a secret.

“Look over there—” Valian nodded to one of the underguards who appeared stiffer and more robotic than the others. He seemed to be issuing commands and directing the others what to do. “I can’t see any members of the Dirge anywhere, so where is that one getting his orders from?”

The underguard leader pointed at the Stone of Dreams and barked an instruction. Two of his men removed the copy of *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table* from the lectern and put there in its place a smaller book with a black leather cover, which they opened at the pages in the middle.

The ground rumbled. Up in the room in the tower, Ivy steadied herself against the stone wall. “What’s happening?” The arrow-slit windows were expanding and filling with stained glass. Fiery torches were materializing on the walls, flooding the room with flickering orange light.

“They’re changing the appearance of Lundinor,” Valian realized.

He led Ivy back outside, onto the battlements. Lundinor was cloaked in darkness. The castle walls had grown higher, and a spiky black roof now covered the courtyard, obscuring Mr. Punch and the underguards. The jolly flags had transformed into tattered rags, and grotesque gargoyles loomed from the battlements.

Gazing into the distance, Ivy saw that Lundinor had turned into a decrepit medieval city. A black-as-night river ran through the center, crossed by arched bridges lined with nightmarish statues of winged creatures. The pointed spires of several Gothic cathedrals poked above the gloomy thatched houses on both banks. The stink of tar and sewage carried on the wind.

At the sounds of footsteps, Ivy turned. Four underguards were marching toward her and Valian, their faces immobile. One of them was holding Seb in an armlock. “Argh!” he yelped, gritting his teeth.

Ivy ran to help him, but the underguard leader strode out from behind them, stopping her in her tracks. The veins on his temple were purple and throbbing, as if he was straining with all his might against the Sword of Wills. When he opened his mouth, a familiar, deep voice spilled out.

“You couldn’t resist joining me, I see.”

Cold fingers traced the back of Ivy’s neck. *Octavius Wrench…?* He must be using the Sword of Wills to control the underguard’s vocal cords.

“Welcome to my glorious New Dawn,” he continued. “You lucky three will have front-row seats right here to watch Lundinor’s resurrection using the Sword of Wills.” He signaled to the other officers. “See that they are made comfortable.”

Two underguards strode toward Ivy and Valian. Ivy considered trying to resist, but she was worried that she’d endanger Seb’s life if she did. Her heart sank as uncommon paper clips were fastened around her wrists and ankles. The officer patted the pockets of her jeans and removed her magnifying glass and yo-yo before pushing her to the floor. Seb and Valian were secured in exactly the same manner and forced to their knees beside her.

One of the officers snapped Seb’s drumsticks in half, making him cry out. Another untied Valian’s boat shoes and removed everything from his pockets—he was carrying a considerable number of uncommon objects—and threw them, along with Ivy’s yo-yo and magnifying glass, over the castle wall. Ivy heard a distant splash as they landed far below in the moat. With a loud scrape, three heavy iron fetters rose from the stone floor and were fixed to their ankle bindings.

The underguard leader lowered himself to Ivy’s level, so his bloodshot eyes were at the same height as hers. “The sun is rising. In an hour’s time, its light will cover this castle and I will meet you all again, face to face.” He grinned malevolently. “Until then, enjoy the show.”

The troop marched away, into the castle. A door slammed shut; the sound of their footsteps faded.

"What does he mean, 'its light will cover this castle'?" Valian asked. "We're miles underground. How can he get the sun to shine down here?"

Ivy remembered Mr. Punch's fragmented warning: *Great Gates…Blackheath…using the sword…*

"Blackheath is above us," she murmured. "*That's* how Octavius Wrench is planning to get natural light in here: the Sword of Wills can control the laws of physics. He's going to lift Lundinor to the surface!"

Seb's face went white as a sheet. "He can't possibly…Lundinor is gigantic. It would be like a massive earthquake; millions of people would die."

"*Billions* of people," Valian corrected, "if he repeats the process in other undermarts around the world….Think of the Dirge's map."

Ivy's ears were suddenly bombarded by angry voices. She wriggled to her knees so she could see over the parapet walls. Selkies were slithering out of the river, over the banks and onto the Gauntlet, the main road heading toward the Great Gates. The hulking shapes of all kinds of dead races floated out under the portcullis of every castle and added themselves to the procession.

"The army of the dead," she said with a shiver. "They're moving."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Seb scratched at the paper clip around his ankles. His wrists were joined so tightly he could only move his fingers a tiny bit apart. “How are we going to escape? These things are unbreakable.”

“I freed Rosie with my uncommon boat shoes, but they’ll be lying at the bottom of the moat by now,” Valian said, tugging his bound feet away from the fetter embedded in the floor.

Ivy reached out with her whispering. Now that the dead were advancing toward the Great Gates, the castle was emptying of voices. She narrowed her field of sense to the curtain wall, concentrating carefully. “I think I can locate Mr. Punch. He’s on the ground floor in a room with what feels like the Stone of Dreams.”

“Can you ask the Stone to help us, like you did with the ship’s wheel?” Valian asked.

Ivy got a sinking feeling, thinking of her failed attempt to communicate with the Sword of Wills. “I’ll give it a go,” she said bravely. She scrunched her nose up in concentration and searched for the broken soul inside the Stone of Dreams. Its solemn voice came into clarity for a few seconds before it became muffled again. She refocused over and over, but on each occasion she was only able to lock on to it for a brief moment. “It’s no use,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not skilled enough.”

“You have to try once more,” Valian urged her firmly. “You couldn’t detect Mr. Rife’s pram when we were outside Forward & Rife’s auction house yesterday. Now you can sense a room in the center of this castle.

Your abilities have gotten stronger, Ivy, even in that short space of time. You *can* do it."

Valian was right. Even without the magnifying glass, she could perceive souls farther away than ever before. She took a deep breath and homed in on the Stone of Dreams again. This time, she told herself to be undaunted.

"Questi sono tempi oscuri per Lundinor," the Stone uttered.

"I can hear it!" Ivy beamed at Seb and Valian. "It's talking in a different language. Italian, I think."

"Why can't it speak English?" Seb groaned. "I don't know any Italian."

"Me neither," Valian added, regretfully. "You'll have to make it understand you some other way."

Ivy considered the problem carefully. Mr. Punch had once told her that the Stone of Dreams was fond of books, which accounted for its extraordinary powers. Maybe her own love of reading might help her connect with it better.

She imagined some of the scenes from her favorite stories—a sword fight between a dastardly pirate and a flying boy, a water vole rowing along a river, a dragon's egg hatching in a boy's arms—and projected them at the Stone of Dreams.

"Ciao, bambina con le storie," it said.

Ivy wasn't sure what that meant, but she'd certainly caught its attention. It didn't seem hostile. She refocused and tried something else. This time, she sent an image of herself, Seb and Valian imprisoned in chains on the castle battlements, followed by another image of three gallant heroes similarly detained: Athos, Porthos and Aramis from *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas. She envisioned them in their striking blue capes and feathered hats, locked up in the Bastille—an infamous French prison.

Instead of responding with words, the Stone of Dreams sent her a vision of a dashing prince riding toward a terrible forest of black thorns. Ivy recognized the scene from *Sleeping Beauty* by Charles Perrault.

And thereupon the floor vibrated. With a loud *clang* the fetters fell apart.

"It's working!" Seb cried, shuffling away. "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it!"

A large crate appeared through the door of Mr. Punch's tower shop and dragged itself over the stones toward them with an ear-flinching scrape. It came to a stop at Valian's side; the lid flew open and Valian peered in. A grin spread across his face. He brought out a small red can of oil with a long steel spout and shook it close to his ear. Liquid splashed inside.

"Thank you, Stone of Dreams!" he cried. Squeezing the lever, Valian dispensed a few drops onto his ankle binding. The ultrathin wire unraveled like elastic and sprang back into a paper clip. Valian then passed the can to Ivy for her to pour it onto his wrists, as he couldn't do that for himself. "Uncommon oil cans change any fluid into what uncommoners call Quick Slick," he explained. "You can use it to loosen just about anything, including the cement between bricks. I've seen people demolish entire buildings with the stuff." Helping each other, the three of them used the Quick Slick to unfasten every paper clip. Valian tucked them inside the pocket of his leather jacket in case they might be useful later.

Once they were all back on their feet, they hurried into the castle and Ivy directed them to the great hall at the heart of the building. Ghoulish black banners hung from the vaulted ceiling, and a long table in the center was set for a feast, complete with spooky candelabra centerpieces.

They found Mr. Punch imprisoned in exactly the same way they had been. He had assumed the guise of the white-bearded store assistant that Ivy had met once before in Mr. Punch's Curiosity Shop. His spectacles were set off-kilter and his shirt and waistcoat had been torn—no doubt during the struggle with the underguards—but his appearance seemed to have stabilized.

"Thank you," he murmured as Valian used the Quick Slick to loosen his chains. Ivy persuaded the Stone of Dreams to open his fetter. "Hurry—we need to get to the gatehouse," he told them. He sounded weary but determined.

"Is everything all right with your…friends?" Ivy questioned. She wasn't sure how to refer to the other souls inside him without sounding rude, and she certainly didn't want to offend any of them.

"The others have finally realized the severity of the situation facing us all," he explained quickly. "I only hope it isn't too late. We have to unlock Lundinor's defenses *now,* if we want to stop the Dirge's army. This way!"

"What about the book on the Stone of Dreams?" Ivy asked as they strode toward the door. It was still lying open on top, but she couldn't read the spine.

"*Dracula* by Bram Stoker," Mr. Punch said, without stopping. "Octavius Wrench believes that if Lundinor looks frightening, commoners will be all the more intimidated when it rises to the surface. There isn't time to change it now. I don't know where they disposed of *King Arthur*."

Ivy wanted to offer the Stone of Dreams a thank-you before they left the room, so she visualized Dorothy, the heroine in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, saying farewell to her friends the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and Lion before she left Oz to return home.

As they rushed through the castle, Mr. Punch checked the walls and looked around every corner. He seemed to be searching for something. Ivy thought it likely he was finding the new layout of the building confusing. Just as they reached the gatehouse, he stopped to examine a tapestry hanging on the wall. It depicted a flock of red-beaked crows swooping down upon a burning village.

"Classic vampire décor," Seb muttered.

Mr. Punch pulled back the fabric to reveal a hidden staircase. Although the light only permeated a few feet down, Ivy could see the steps were thick with dust and covered with spiderwebs. "This passage only appears in versions of Lundinor when my shop has stone walls," Mr. Punch explained. "It leads to a spot outside the Great Gates. The underguards and I last used it during the Great Battle of Twelfth Night to evacuate many of Lundinor's citizens. I want you three to do the same now. Find the ladders in the arrivals chamber on the other side: they will lead you to safety on the surface."

"What about you?" Ivy asked. "You can't stop the Dirge's army on your own."

"I won't be on my own," Mr. Punch reassured her. "Come, you'll see."

He led them to the portcullis, which was still drawn up from when the underguards had left. The drawbridge beyond was flanked by wooden posts, each fitted with a rusty iron bracket that held a murky glass lamp. Flames flickered inside every lantern except one.

"Every undermart in the world has the same defense mechanism," he told them, approaching the cold lantern. "Only the highest-ranking quartermaster is ever told of it, so I doubt the Dirge know." He struck a match, opened the hinged glass panel in the lamp and lit the rope wick. A flame burst into life, sending a misty glow seeping through the sides of glass. The other streetlamps shuddered and, with a splintering *crack*, their wooden supports split in two. In unison they uprooted themselves from the bridge floor on their new legs and turned to face Mr. Punch. Their iron brackets unfurled to form arms, with which they lifted their lamps on top, giving them each a sort of large glowing head.

"Lamppost warriors…," Seb murmured. "That's…cool."

"Stop the Dirge's forces from reaching the Great Gates," Mr. Punch commanded. "Ignore any instructions from the underguards: they are not themselves."

The soldiers saluted and turned in the direction of the Gauntlet. Ivy remembered the different lampposts she'd seen in Nubrook and Strassa and guessed that they must have the same uncommon power. She bloomed with hope for a brief moment before remembering how vast the army of the dead was.

"Now you three get yourselves to safety," Mr. Punch ordered as he joined the rear of his battalion. "Good luck."

Ivy, Seb and Valian returned to the castle, descended the secret staircase and started down a long, straight tunnel. Uncommon lemon squeezers were fixed to the walls every ten paces, their pale-yellow glow muted by layers of cobweb. The cool air smelled musty and stale: it didn't surprise Ivy that nobody had been there for fifty-odd years. The place made her think of Judy and Scratch, alone inside the mountain at Strassa. She hoped they were OK.

After a few minutes of walking, they heard strange sounds overhead—high-pitched shrieks, thuds and bangs. They quickened their pace as the walls started to rumble. The conflict had begun.

"This path must run below the Gauntlet." Valian's mouth was drawn in a straight line, his forehead crinkled. "Everyone's right above us."

Ivy had a nauseous feeling in her stomach, and it was only growing worse. She pondered whether Valian felt as uncomfortable as she did about running away from a clash with the Dirge. After all, he'd spent his entire life fighting them and was bound to want to do so now. "I know we came here to help Mr. Punch—and we've done that," she said firmly, "but it feels wrong to leave when he's fighting to protect everyone we love."

"I know," Seb agreed. "But what can we really do?" He bared his arms, showing the empty space where his drumsticks used to be. "We've got no way to stop them. We wouldn’t last a second up there.”

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try,” Ivy told him.

“Hey—what’s that up ahead?” Valian said.

A strange-shaped shadow lay across their path. As they got closer, they saw that it was actually several objects strewn over the floor, carpeted in decades of filth. Ivy brushed clean an underguard’s tricorne hat, while Valian heaved a black bicycle upright. Seb found a small canvas pouch printed with the underguard logo—a five-pointed star surrounding a gloved fist.

“This must have been strapped to the bicycle,” he said, examining the Velcro on one side. “Mr. Punch said that this tunnel was last used to evacuate people during the Great Battle of Twelfth Night. Perhaps an underguard officer left it here in all the commotion?”

Ivy put the hat down and ran her hands across the frame of the bicycle. It felt warm to the touch. “This is uncommon, but I’ve never seen an underguard riding one before. Do you know what it does, Valian?”

“No, sorry. The underguards must have used them before I was born.”

Seb unzipped the canvas pouch and a silver thimble fell out.

“Now those, I do know a little about,” Valian said, “although I’ve never seen one in action.” He picked it up. “My parents told me that uncommon thimbles offer ‘the heart’s protection’—whatever that is.”

Ivy knew buttons treated ailments, so perhaps all sewing-related objects had healing properties. “There might be other objects in the tunnel,” she said, taking the bicycle by the handlebars and wheeling it forward. “Let’s keep going and see what we can scavenge.”

They quickly reached the end of the tunnel after collecting just one more item—a broken toilet brush that only worked when you gave the handle a good whack. As they climbed the steps toward the exit, Seb gazed despondently at the dying sparks between the bristles. With every step, the sounds of battle grew more ferocious. Ivy heard the crackling roar of fire and the splintering of wood. Perhaps the lampposts weren’t faring too well….

“It sounds like they’re fighting right outside,” she said. “If this tunnel opens on the other side of the Great Gates, then Mr. Punch must have failed to hold the Dirge’s army back.” Tears threatened at the corners of her eyes as she imagined what might have happened to him. “If Octavius Wrench raises Lundinor to the surface, the army will move into London.”

“Then it’s now or never if we want to help,” Valian decided, gathering the uncommon paper clips from his pocket.”

Ivy knew their chances were slim. She readied herself to mount the uncommon bike, her hands shaking on the handlebars. She had no idea what it could do, but if it had belonged to an underguard, then it must have some useful ability. Seb banged the faulty toilet brush against the tunnel wall to ignite the sparks, his knuckles white on the handle.

“Before we go out there,” Valian said, his eyes watery, “I want to say thank you. I couldn’t have found Rosie without your help—not just in the past few days, but before that too. Having friends like you gave me hope again.”

Ivy smiled at him. She tried to think of something to say to make them all feel braver. “Let’s do this for Rosie,” she managed in a brittle voice. “And for Mum and Dad, and Scratch. Let’s do this for them.”

“And Judy,” Seb added, “who I still may be able to see again—if by some miracle we survive this.”

“And Mr. Rife,” Valian said, “and Curtis and Johnny Hands and all our friends in Lundinor.”

Ivy pictured the faces of all the uncommoners she and Seb had met in the last year who’d shown them kindness—Violet Eyelet, Ethel Dread, Mr. Littlefair, Miss Hoff and Miss Winkle….

She clenched her jaw and felt her resolve stiffen.

The tunnel exit was hidden behind a large trader’s information board, which swung aside to allow them through. A deafening roar hit Ivy in the chest as she caught sight of the battlefield ahead, filling the arrivals chamber. The wrought-iron gates of Lundinor were bent open as if they were made of nothing stronger than modeling clay, and a whirlwind of dead creatures poured through them, running on two legs or four, some slithering, others flying. There were beings immersed in flames; others that looked like huge spiders the size of elephants. Ivy spotted lampposts with burning legs and smashed lamp-heads parrying blows from three-armed ninjas with long swords. Wraithmoths swooped down upon them, turning the air noxious.

Adrenaline shot through Ivy's body. She leaped onto her bike, aiming for a group of grim-wolves who were swiping at a lamppost warrior with their sharp claws. On the edge of her field of vision, she saw Valian run into the fray, throwing paper clips like Frisbees. Seb sprinted at his side, aiming charged flares at nearby enemies.

"Gahhhh!" Ivy cried, doing her best impression of the warrior queen Boudicca. She thrust her feet down on the pedals and shot forward, her bones shaking as the bike crossed the rocky cave floor.

Individual scuffles flashed past on either side—grimps pulverizing lampposts with clubs, green gobbles spearing wooden legs with their pincers. A series of dull thuds resonated by Ivy's knees. She almost laughed when she saw that the silver spokes of the bicycle wheel were detaching themselves from the rim and shooting like arrows toward oncoming aggressors. They seemed to have perfect aim. Ivy spotted one spoke pierce the tough, slimy hide of a selkie, who screeched in pain—*No wonder the underguards used them.* The spokes scattered toward the grim-wolf pack like porcupine quills. The wolves howled and fled to another part of the cave.

Lundinor

Knowing she was riding a weapon energized Ivy's muscles. She braked and, with one foot touching the floor, swiveled the bicycle around to face Valian and Seb. They were backed up against the cave wall, defending themselves against a pack of vicious-looking scarecrow creatures who attacked with flaming scythes. Ivy drove the pedals hard, rattling toward them at full speed. Enough spoke missiles remained on the wheels to defend against oncoming attackers without the wheels buckling, allowing Ivy to clear a path through the horde.

When she reached the boys, however, the bike collapsed. Ivy launched into the legs of one of the scarecrow creatures, stunning it before it could swipe its scythe at Valian's head. She grazed her hands and knees as she came to a skidding halt beside Seb.

A loud cracking noise sounded overhead. Everyone—on both sides of the battle—looked up at the cave ceiling as dust fell in a number of places, clouding the air. Stalactites the size of refrigerators began dropping like giant daggers, shattering on the ground below. Entire swathes of the Dirge's army went flying, along with what was left of Mr. Punch's lamppost forces.

"This is it!" Valian grasped the torn sleeve of Ivy's coat and dragged her toward him. "Lundinor's moving to the surface; we need to take refuge."

Seb shuffled closer as Valian fetched the thimble from his pocket. "Here's hoping 'the heart's protection' can shelter us from those giant falling rocks."

Ivy held her breath, willing the thimble to save them. Valian pushed his finger inside, and a ring of ultrathin metal slid around the thimble's edge, about the width of Ivy's arm. Another ring formed, and another. They continued appearing—in increasing diameter—until they had formed a huge dome-like shield, with the thimble at the apex.

The ground tremored as rubble crashed down around them, but the thimble shield didn't even twitch. Valian's arm trembled, holding his finger in place. Ivy went to support his elbow, assuming the load was hard to bear.

"No, it's all right," he told her. "It's as light as paper."

It wasn't the weight of the thimble shield that caused him to shake, she realized; it was fright. Smoke crept under the edge of the shield and dust coated the inside of Ivy’s mouth, making her cough. She tucked herself closer to the boys and closed her eyes, waiting for it all to be over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sipping from a cup of tea, an old lady stared out the window of the number 89 bus as it rumbled along across the east corner of Blackheath Park. The heath was quiet and still, the dim, cloudless sky lit by the early morning sun. It made a pleasant change from the thunder and lightning of the last week during Storm Sarah.

The lady’s gaze wandered around the ground floor of the double-decker. There were only two other passengers on board: a man in jogging shorts and a T-shirt, covered in sweat; and a teenage boy wearing a football shirt. The boy had a small Yorkshire terrier snoozing in his lap.

Just then a loud *boom!* sounded outside, rattling the windows. The old lady dropped her teacup and grabbed the nearest railing as the bus shook violently. There was a screech as it swerved off the road and mounted a bank, coming to a sharp halt. The impact launched her into the aisle, where she banged her head against another seat.

She blinked, rubbing a spot above her ear. Her head was sore, but she couldn’t feel any injuries. Had there been an earthquake? She could hear a strange groaning sound outside, like the very bowels of the earth were moving.

“Everyone all right?” a man called.

“Yes, I’m OK!” The lady hoisted herself up. The door to the bus hung open, and the jogger was peering in.

“The driver’s awake but dazed,” he said. “I’d better stay with him.”

The lady made her way over to the teenage boy with the dog. “Hello, son, are you injured?”

The boy was pale and speaking hurriedly in another language. The dog whimpered as she took the boy’s shaking hand. “It’s all right; you’re going to be fine. Do you have any pain anywhere?” she asked him.

The boy rubbed the back of his head.

“There’s smoke rising from the engine,” the jogger cried. “We’ve got to get everyone out!” He pressed the emergency door button. A whiff of churned earth wafted in from outside. The old lady and the teenage boy helped each other down the step onto the grass, while the jogger attended to the driver.

“I checked upstairs: the top floor of the bus is empty,” he added. “But I’ve got no reception on my phone. What’s going on?”

The ground was still trembling—an aftershock maybe? Peering across the heath, the old lady noticed the crumbling outline of a tall structure that hadn’t been there before: a gated archway with strangely shaped posts on either side. She rubbed her forehead, guessing she had a concussion and was seeing things. It was probably fallen trees or debris from damaged buildings.

Three figures were approaching from across the field. One wore a white lab coat. Another—who appeared to be *floating* over the grass—was dressed in a hooded robe. The tallest of the three sported a black suit and bowler hat and carried a cane.

“Hello? Excuse me!” the jogger shouted. “We need some help over here!”

The strangers murmured. As they drew closer, the old lady saw that two of them were wearing masks covering their faces. One had horns and tusks; the other featured a wide snake-like mouth and jutting fangs. But Halloween had come and gone….

She glanced nervously at the jogger beside her, whose face was drawn wide in disbelief.

Sensing danger, she turned and ran.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The tracks of Valian's tears were the only patches of his cheeks clean of dust. Blood trickled from a wound above his ear; his leather jacket was torn at the shoulder. He viewed Ivy and Seb nervously before pulling his finger out of the thimble. The rings of wafer-thin steel that formed the giant shield retracted, revealing a bright landscape beyond.

Ivy wiped her nose and forced herself to her feet. Pain throbbed in her hands and knees; her lungs burned as she heaved in fresh air smelling of mud and rain. The red and white lights of slowly moving traffic blinked in the distance. She recognized the vista: they were standing on a hill in Blackheath Park, overlooking London.

"This can't be happening," Seb croaked, staggering upright.

Brilliant sunlight illuminated the devastation of their surroundings. The scythe-wielding scarecrows had vanished along with the rest of the Dirge's army. In their place was the empty floor of the arrivals cave, now fenced by a crumbling wall of soil, rock and debris, churned from the earth. The entire area had been dragged to the surface.

Ivy looked over her shoulder to where the Great Gates of Lundinor towered over them, twisted and damaged after being caught in the skirmish. Ten meters of rocky wall was still intact on either side, though wobbling ominously in the breeze. The path through the gates sloped downward into a giant chasm. "Lundinor hasn't resurfaced in its entirety yet," she remarked. "Maybe Octavius Wrench has to do it in phases because wielding the Sword of Wills takes so much energy.” The thought gave her a sliver of hope. “We can’t give up. Not yet.”

Nearby, a bus had swerved onto the grass to avoid a large crevice in the road. Steam rose from the engine at the back; a few people—commoners—seemed to be sitting or lying in the field a safe distance away.

“Let’s see if we can help those people,” Ivy suggested. Adrenaline was still pumping through her veins; she couldn’t stand still.

Seb nodded, though she could see that his hair was singed and his forehead puckered with red blisters.

“Can you sense the army of the dead?” Valian asked, looking left and right. “They can’t have just vanished.”

Ivy spread her senses across the park, but it was difficult to control her skill after the anguish she’d felt during the battle. Her mind and body felt shaken and weak. She managed to detect a prattle of fractured souls filling the gaping hole that dropped down into Lundinor. “They’ve stopped just under the surface,” she said, “like they’re waiting for something.”

“…or someone,” Seb corrected, holding a shaky finger out toward the crashed bus.

Several shadowy figures were moving with calm purpose in their direction. Ivy caught the disturbing hiss of Octavius Wrench’s wrecked soul among them. She angled her body defensively. “It’s the Dirge. They’re carrying the Sands of Change and the Sword of Wills.”

Hemlock was easy to distinguish because of her white lab coat; the others were wearing dark clothes.

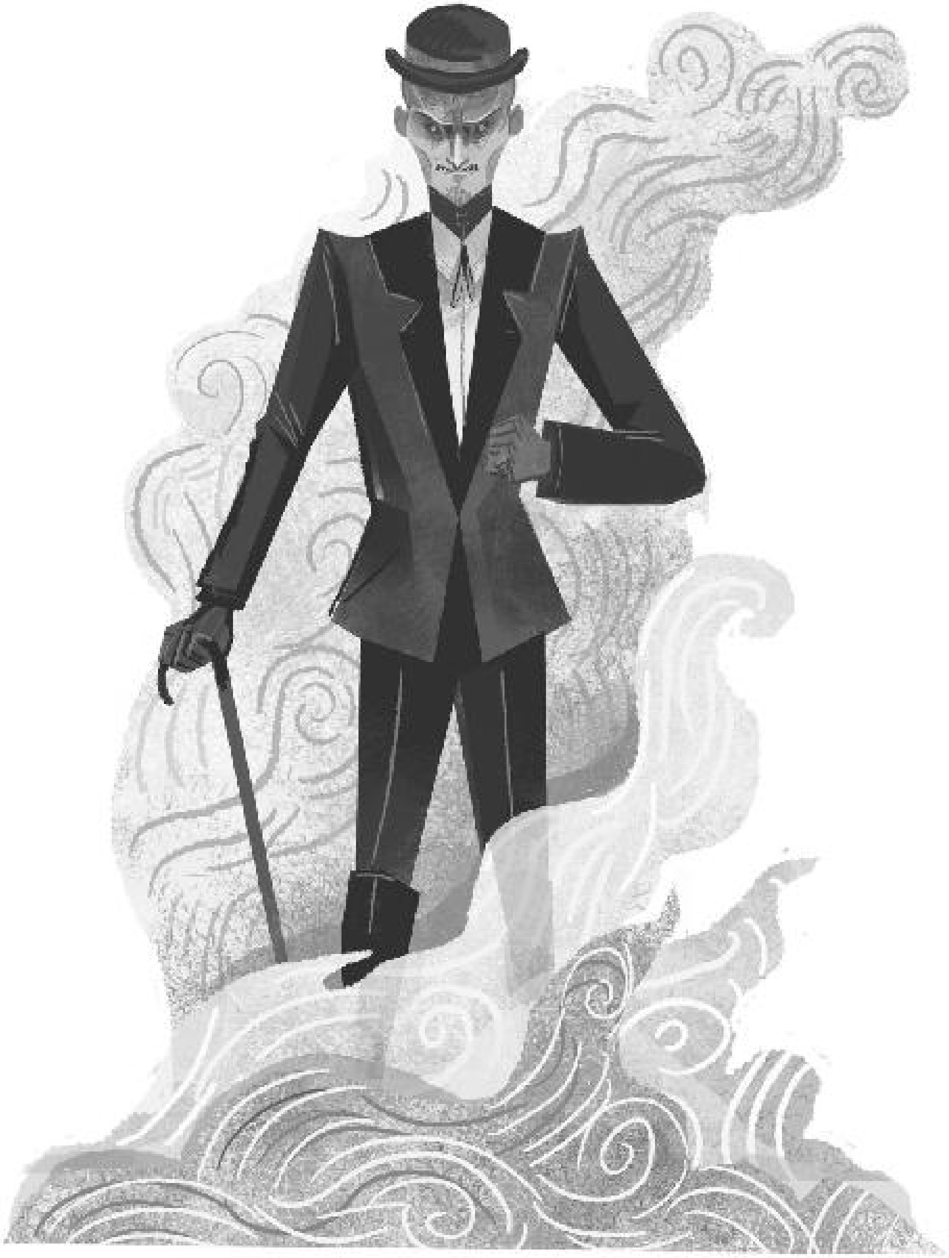
“They’ll kill us if they see us,” Valian said bleakly. “We can hide over there.” He steered them behind a knoll of soil, where they all crouched down. Seb inspected his phone screen, being careful to shield the light so that it didn’t give away their position. He spoke in a hushed voice: “I can’t call the police. I’ve got no reception up here.”

“It might have something to do with the Great Gates,” Valian said. “Common technology doesn’t work well in Lundinor. Perhaps the gates are interfering with the signal. We have to think of something else.”

“With only the thimble, we won’t be able to fight them,” Ivy decided. “Maybe we can outwit them some other way?”

Murmured noises signaled that the group had drawn closer. Ivy’s skin prickled as she heard a distressed voice. “Let me go!” a woman was crying. The sound was muffled, as if something was choking her.

Ivy peeked out from behind the mound. The Dirge stood in front of the Great Gates. Ivy could tell who they all were from the masks they were wearing. For the first time she saw Octavius Wrench's true face, in his Augrit form. His skin was transparent and, through it, she saw dark shapes shifting around like shadows under the surface. From the glint of silver in his hand, she could tell he was carrying the Sands of Change. The Sword of Wills hovered over his back, just as it had done when Monkshood had been wielding it to control Valian on top of Breath Falls. As long as Octavius Wrench possessed it, Ivy knew that the underguard would remain under his command.



Octavius Wrench was flanked on one side by Hemlock and on the other by Monkshood, who, as he floated, held an elderly woman up by her neck. The woman had graying hair and wore a periwinkle-blue scarf draped around her shoulders, the ends falling over the front of her long wool coat. Her slim legs dangled above the ground as she tried to wriggle free. The poor woman seemed as helpless as a rag doll in Monkshood's grasp. "Please," she croaked desperately. "What do you want with me?"

Fire burned within Ivy's belly. "She's a commoner," she muttered to Valian and Seb. "She's got no idea what's going on. We have to save her."

Ivy had no time to formulate a plan as Seb went racing out from behind their mound, shouting angrily. She supposed that was the only strategy he'd come up with—scream at the evil people until they went away. Her feet pounded on the cave floor as she hurried after him, considering their *real* options. They were unarmed and outnumbered; how could they possibly win?

"Leave her alone!" Seb yelled.

"Help me!" The old lady's voice trembled as she writhed around, longing to be free.

"You! *Again?*" Octavius Wrench snarled and turned a dark stare on Ivy and Seb. "What an unpleasant surprise." He lifted a gloved finger, and, at his command Monkshood hoisted the old lady higher. A small squeak escaped from her throat, yanking on Ivy's heart.

"Put her down!" Ivy cried, her nostrils flaring. "She hasn't done anything to you!"

Monkshood parted his robes with his free hand and, in a streak of silver, withdrew his uncommon can opener. Hemlock lashed her electric cord and plug toward them, cracking the stone floor.

"Kill them all," Octavius Wrench commanded. With a flick of his fingers, a trio of grim-wolves came padding through the Great Gates and began sniffing around. "And search the area for any more."

Ivy and Seb started edging back. In her peripheral vision, Ivy noticed Valian run to join them. "Ivy, look out!" he yelled.

She moved away—just in time—as Hemlock's plug struck the ground by her feet. She knew it was only a matter of time before she was ripped apart—either by the plug's claw-like pins or a steel crab's pincers.

All at once a strange noise sounded overhead—a scream combined with creaking wheels and the high-pitched tune of a nursery mobile. Ivy looked up. Mr. Rife—feathered buccaneer's hat and all—came flailing through the sky, one hand gripped around the handlebar of a vintage pram. Squashed inside the carriage was a small girl with thick ice-blond hair.

"Rosie!" Valian cried happily.

The pram crushed Monkshood as it landed on top of him. Freed from his grasp, the old lady managed to jump aside in time to avoid being hit as well. She rolled and lay where she stopped, stirring only to rub her head. Rosie jumped lightly out of the pram.

Glaring at Mr. Rife, Hemlock charged—

But Mr. Rife was ready for her. “Right then.” Tensing his jaw, Mr. Rife opened his jacket to reveal a battery of objects hastily strapped to the inside (Ivy had seen some of them displayed at the auction house). “Let’s see how you deal with these.” He grabbed a staple gun and fired it in Hemlock’s direction. Although no staples shot out, Hemlock slowed. Her limbs jerked as if they were attached to strings being worked by a puppeteer. Then her feet cemented themselves to the ground, her neck went stiff, and with one arm sticking out at a right angle and her other hand stuck to her hip, she looked ready to perform the “I’m a Little Teapot” nursery rhyme.

“Gah!” she screeched, struggling to break free.

Meanwhile, as Octavius swooped toward the army of the dead and started barking orders at them to attack London, Monkshood activated his can opener, releasing a horde of razor-sharp crabs onto the cave floor. The slashing noises of their knifelike pincers sent tremors through Ivy’s jaw as she stumbled back.

“Mr. Rife!” she screamed. “Help!”

Mr. Rife, catching sight of where Ivy, Seb and Valian stood defenseless, threw something at Rosie. Rosie bent her knees and leaped up to catch it. It was a long-stemmed wooden tobacco pipe—the very same one that her parents had scouted years ago in Bolivia. Ivy remembered having seen it on display at the auction house. But how it was going to help now, she couldn’t imagine.

She stared as Rosie blew once into the pipe and then began talking…

…in *bird noises*? Ivy was still puzzled.

Trilling, tweeting and cooing, Rosie pointed at the surrounding trees as if she was giving instructions. For a second, Ivy had no idea what was going on, but then she remembered that the pipe allowed the user to speak any language on earth. She hadn’t realized it included languages that weren’t even human.

The treetops rustled as a noisy flock of pigeons shot out into the sky, and then dived toward the crabs. They attacked with precision—pecking at any weak spots in the crustaceans’ shells or picking them up by their claws only to drop them from a great height. A whirling mass of dust, shell and feathers began to cover the cave floor.

Dodging around the brawl, Valian ran to meet Rosie. “You made it!” he declared, embracing her tightly. His laugh sounded free and happy, in spite of the chaos all about them.

Valian and Rosie’s joy was still making Ivy smile—she couldn’t help it—as she and Seb hurried toward the elderly lady lying on the ground. “Are you all right?” Ivy asked, kneeling beside her. Very gently, Seb helped the woman sit upright. She had a cut on her lip, and where her scarf had worked loose there were puffy red marks visible on her neck where Monkshood had been gripping her. She looked dazed, but managed to mumble, “There are others—by the bus…a young lad.”

“We’ll help them,” Seb said. “Don’t worry. You’re safe now.”

Above the squawk and clatter of pigeon versus crab, a deep, wicked voice resonated through the air—“Oh, I wouldn’t say *that*.”

Ivy’s chest trembled as, a short distance away, Octavius Wrench stepped forward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Your perseverance is pointless," Octavius Wrench told them blankly. "You can't possibly beat me: my power is unlimited."

Leaving the old lady with Seb, Ivy got to her feet. She noticed the Sands of Change still in Octavius Wrench's grasp and, steeling her nerves, she tried to assemble a plan. Octavius Wrench's weakness was his pride—he had boasted when he first met them how powerful he was, and again just now. She thought of how he had been the head of a rich and influential family, but how he had stood for election as quartermaster against Mr. Punch and lost. Maybe she could use their old rivalry to her advantage.

"You think you're invincible, but you're not!" she cried. "Mr. Punch is stronger than you'll ever be."

Octavius Wrench's laughter rumbled deep and low. "Mr. Punch is currently cowering in an underguard prison under *my* control, soon to be tried by *my* new laws. His future is mine to decide. That is weakness, not power."

Ivy wondered if that was true. She didn't know what had happened to Mr. Punch during the battle. She hoped, wherever he was, that he was OK and that what she was about to say wouldn't put him in any more danger. Whatever her fears, she refused to let them show. Instead she took a deep breath: "But Hobs are far more formidable than *Augrits,*" she argued, saying the name like it was a playground insult. "And Mr. Punch is a Hob."

Octavius Wrench’s form shifted almost imperceptibly. The Sword of Wills twitched at his back. Ivy intuited that the information about Mr. Punch being a Hob had come as a shock. Hemlock’s eyes flicked toward her leader; Monkshood slowly hovered upright.

Ivy continued quickly, before any of the Dirge could shut her up: “I don’t know why that army bother following you,” she said, pointing to the Great Gates. “You’re not the most powerful race of the dead at all. *Everything* you say is a lie!”

The army became agitated. Ivy’s insult had gotten a reaction. She just had to push Octavius Wrench a little bit further and her plan would work. She could see Seb’s and Valian’s anxious faces in the corner of her vision; they were bound to be wondering what she was up to. “The truth is,” she resumed, “without natural light, you’re feeble. You can’t even step inside an undermart without using one of Alexander Brewster’s potions. How can you be expected to locate anyone’s soulmate?”

Some of the dead began poking through the shadows of the chasm, taking notice of what was going on.

Octavius Wrench’s neck twitched, but his deep voice remained composed. “My power is unparalleled. As an Augrit, I can be whoever I want to be. I do not merely change my appearance but my whole constitution. I effectively become an entirely different race. Any race at all.” He lifted away from the ground and expanded his arms, grinning malevolently. “Let me demonstrate.” The ends of his jacket flared out as he spun. His strange, transparent face became a blur, and then, when he stopped, his skin looked fleshy and normal. “There. Now I am a Hob.”

Not quite, Ivy thought, shuffling backward.

The air stirred. Monkshood wobbled and, along with several members of the Dirge’s army, slid over the stone floor toward Octavius Wrench as if he was a magnet for the dead. The dead soldiers clawed at the ground, fighting against the invisible force pulling them in.

“What is the meaning of this?” Monkshood growled as they were all dragged closer. Splaying his arms for balance, he dropped his can opener, and the steel crabs disappeared.

“Something’s wrong,” Octavius snapped, throwing his arms out. “I can’t change back.”

Ivy could see the veins pulsing on his forehead from the effort of trying. “You can’t transform again because you aren’t yet a Hob,” she explained. “You see, Hobs are formed from more than one broken soul. So in order to truly become one, you need first to amass other fragments of soul inside you.”

Monkshood’s can opener and Hemlock’s electric cord both shot straight to Octavius Wrench and vanished in a tiny blink of light. He flinched as the broken souls trapped inside them were absorbed within him. His face flashed with panic. “NO!”

There was a loud *whoosh* as Monkshood and several of the dead finally flew the remaining distance to their so-called leader. As soon as they touched Octavius Wrench, their empty robes, and Monkshood’s mask, fell to the floor with a soft *thud.* The other members of the Dirge’s army retreated into the shadows.

“What have you done?” Hemlock asked in her quiet, calm voice. “Where is Blackclaw?”

Ivy didn’t reply; she was too busy staring at Octavius Wrench, who was now the size of a telephone booth and getting bigger. The stitches of his black suit ripped apart as his limbs swelled like sausages. Ivy could see his features changing shape. She sensed the broken souls of Monkshood and the other races of the dead fighting within him, trying to wrestle control. Octavius Wrench’s arms jerked, and Ivy saw the Sands of Change slip from his fingers and fly out of his reach into a patch of mud.

Her communications with Mr. Punch over the last few days had taught Ivy how problematic existing as a Hob really was. She thought about how often the souls within him had to compromise to allow one another an equal time in charge. Octavius Wrench was power-hungry with no desire to share anything. Ivy hoped he would find being a Hob a lot more difficult than he realized.

And she was right.

Beneath the rim of Octavius Wrench’s burst bowler hat, his face altered. His skin speckled with liver spots; the shallows of his eyes grew deeper, darker. Monkshood’s gaunt complexion, black lips and hollow nose socket appeared. “Leader, release me,” he demanded gruffly.

Then his face changed as fast as a TV switching between channels. This time, it became the visage of a creature with cracked russet skin and tentacles writhing from its neck. “Let me out of here!” one of the dead soldiers demanded. They had a buzzing voice, like a frustrated insect’s.

Then, for a moment, Octavius Wrench reclaimed control, his brow furrowed in a deep scowl. “Stop squabbling!” he bellowed. “Allow me to take power—” But as his concentration finally broke, the Sword of Wills went limp at his back and clattered to the ground.

Ivy’s lungs emptied as she thought of all the underguard forces around the world who would be waking from a bad dream, slowly realizing what had happened. With any luck, they’d be able to jump into action as soon as possible. She looked around and saw the army of the dead begin spilling from the Great Gates. Ivy quickly assessed their body language to see if they meant her harm, but they were all focused on Octavius Wrench, curious to see what was happening.

Hemlock shook her only moving fist at Ivy and Seb. “You’ll pay for this!” She tried to turn her head to address the army, but her neck was fixed. “Loyal supporters,” she shouted instead, “attack everyone—now!”

The dead hesitated. Angry muttering flitted through their ranks. A few winged beasts bolted into the sky; a couple of scarecrows scarpered. The grim-wolves whom Octavius Wrench had ordered to search the area sniffed the air, snarled and scurried back into Lundinor.

A horn sounded in the morning air, like the rallying call of a mythical army.

“Is it just me, or does that sound familiar?” Seb asked Ivy.

She scanned the area and spotted people emerging from the surrounding fields and roads. They looked like commoners in regular winter clothing—gloves, thick coats and boots; some had handbags or backpacks. They were all carrying an empty lantern of one sort or another: some were made of glass and were highly decorated; others had been constructed from scrap metal. Ivy could sense they were all uncommon. Two women wearing puffy jackets and knitted scarves appeared from behind Ivy, and she spotted divergent arrow pins attached to the rims of their woolly hats. “They’re Tidemongers…,” she told Seb as the women walked by. “That sound—it was the same alarm we heard at the Tidemongers’ base in Nubrook.” Hope burst within her like a firework.

They heard the flap of wings, rustle of bodies and stomp of feet as the dead scattered. A cry went up from one of the Tidemongers, and in unison they all opened the doors of their lanterns. Ivy stared as a group of selkies, who had been slithering away, suddenly changed direction against their will and sped toward a large railway lantern being lugged by two Tidemonger agents. A meter from the lantern, the selkies vanished in a slimy green flash and reappeared *inside* the lantern casing. Squashed behind the glass, they looked like strange green trifles with layers of seaweed limbs and jagged teeth. It couldn’t be comfortable, Ivy thought. The two agents hastily shut the door of the lantern, trapping them within. And in fact all around, Ivy and Seb saw, the dead who hadn’t managed to get away fast enough found themselves being sucked inside the Tidemongers’ lanterns, as if they were formed of nothing more than gas. In a matter of moments, every lantern was filled.

A small group of agents had trapped Octavius Wrench in a brass fuel-burning lantern and then used an uncommon chair to detain Hemlock. As soon as she sat down, the chair crossed its armrests over her lap like it was folding its arms, buckling her into place. Ivy ran over to where the Sands of Change was glinting in the mud. She picked it up, and, after checking that the clasp was safely unfastened, she wiped it clean on her sleeve and stuffed it in her pocket.

CHAPTER THIRTY

When Ivy returned to the others, she saw a familiar figure in a long coat striding out of the Great Gates toward them. “So you’re still alive,” Curtis said, holding a hand to her chest, although she was scowling. “Your gloves were flagged at the gates of Strassa; I was about to come after you when Nubrook went into lockdown.”

“Seb and I didn’t want to get you into trouble,” Ivy said honestly, “but we had to sneak away. It was a matter of life and death.”

Curtis glared at them for a long moment, saying nothing. Over her shoulder, Ivy noticed the remaining army of the dead fleeing as officers from Lundinor’s Special Branch—Ivy could tell because of their silver braid epaulettes—arrived and filed out into the surrounding area. Ivy knew it was their job to hide the uncommon world, although she wasn’t sure how they were going to cover up the mess.

“This morning will be marked in uncommon history,” Curtis told them, surveying the scene as, under heavy guard, a chair-strapped Hemlock and Octavius Wrench’s lantern were returned to Lundinor. “The Tidemongers will see to it that the Hexroom is incinerated and those two are detained in ghoul holes until their trial. From this day forward there will be no remaining trace of the Dirge.”

Ivy’s nerves softened as the muscles in her body relaxed. The attack had been averted and the people of London were safe. She smiled at her brother. “Mum and Dad are going to be OK.”

“About that…” Curtis pursed her lips. “Your parents were expecting you home five hours ago, and I’ve yet to devise an explanation for where the three of us have been or why we haven’t contacted them.”

“We’ll think of something,” Seb said dismissively. “We can always use the tea technique. It works every time whenever Ivy and I have to lie about uncommon stuff.”

“The tea technique?” Curtis looked bemused.

“First you offer to make them a cup of tea,” Ivy explained. “Then you put sugar in each of their cups. At least two teaspoons.”

Curtis frowned. “How will a sweet beverage convince your parents that we’re telling the truth?”

“It won’t,” Seb said. “What you’ve got to do is wait till they’ve taken their first sip before you start talking. They *hate* sugar in their tea. As soon as they taste it, they’ll be so distracted they won’t really listen to a word we say.” He chuckled. “You know, you should feel privileged—we’ve never told any of our babysitters that tip before.”

A faint smile traced Curtis’s lips. “I see.”

“Do you know what happened to everyone paralyzed by Alexander’s Statue Salt?” Valian asked, his arm clamped around Rosie’s shoulders. “Will they be OK?”

Curtis gave a respectful nod to Rosie and Mr. Rife. “After what you both did in Nubrook and Strassa—freeing the citizens with that music box—we have sent instructions to other underguard forces around the world. They now know what to do in order to reverse its effects.”

Mr. Rife gave a brief smile of acknowledgment, but his gaze was focused on the old lady still sitting beside Seb. Her face glistened with tears as she stared up at them all. He bent down and offered her his polka-dot handkerchief. “Madam,” he said graciously, “is there anything I can do to help?”

“Who are all these people?” she asked, dabbing at her cheeks.

“Why don’t we get you to your feet and I’ll explain,” Mr. Rife reassured her. “Take my arm.” He and Seb helped the woman up. She seemed weak and unsteady.

“You need to be seen by a doctor,” Curtis said. “I’ll show you the way.” She escorted Mr. Rife and the old woman toward a couple of Special

Branch officers. Ivy saw one of them fetch a whistle from his pocket. She had seen an underguard officer use one before, on her parents.

“They’re going to clean her memory, aren’t they?” Ivy said. “She won’t have a clue what really happened here.”

“That’s the law,” Seb reminded her. “It’s either that or she has nightmares about Octavius Wrench for the rest of her life. I know which I’d rather have.”

Three people, one of whom was floating, advanced across the cave floor. As they passed Curtis, she bowed her head and muttered, “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

Seb squinted. “Hey, is that *Judy*?”

“And *Mr. Punch*?” Ivy’s skin cooled with relief as she recognized the fresh-faced quartermaster. His neatly trimmed auburn beard fell over the lapels of his red-tailed ringmaster’s jacket, and his black top hat sat imperiously straight on his head. Judy skated next to him, her knee now free of the effects of the Statue Salt. Hovering beside them both was Johnny Hands, whose jester’s hat wobbled as he came to a stop. Ivy spotted the long handle of the Sword of Wills poking above his shoulder blades.

“Don’t worry, my dear, I know very well how to use it,” he said, noticing the direction of her gaze. “I’ll have the Great Gates buried and everything returned to normal before you can say ‘Scaramouche, Scaramouche, can you do the fandango?’ ”

“Right…,” Seb commented.

Judy embraced Seb, Ivy, Valian and Rosie in turn. “Here you go,” she said, returning Scratch and the satchel to Ivy. “Thanks for lending him to me. It would have been lonely back there without him.”

Ivy closed her fingers around the little bell. “Good to see you again,” she told him.

“You is too,” Scratch replied. She could sense the broken soul inside him restless with energy now that they were back together.

“What happened to the Sands of Change?” Judy asked. “It’s so powerful—did Octavius Wrench use it?”

Ivy slipped her free hand into her pocket, intending to pull out the Sands of Change, but then she hesitated….No one knew that she had the necklace….If she wanted to, she could use it on Scratch….

“Not that we saw,” Seb said to Judy. “Maybe Octavius didn’t have the mental strength to wield the Sword of Wills *and* use the Sands of Change at the same time.”

“I have the Sands of Change right here,” Ivy said, quickly deciding it would be safer if she handed it over to Johnny Hands. She retrieved it from her pocket and held it up for all to see. The gem glittered in the morning sun. “I picked it up after Octavius Wrench dropped it. What will the Tidemongers do with it?”

Johnny Hands collected the jewel into a handkerchief and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans. “We will keep it safe,” he said firmly. “Judy has explained how it has changed her; there may be a way to utilize its powers to help any dead who wish to become Departed, and so end this soulmates crisis once and for all.” Regarding Scratch in Ivy’s grasp, Johnny Hands winked and lowered his voice: “I’m sure—for special cases—we may be able to loan it out.”

“Agent Hands?” a voice called from the trees. “Sir, we need you.”

Johnny Hands waved. “On my way!” He patted Ivy on the head as if she was a small puppy. “See you around, Ivy Sparrow. I hope our paths cross again.”

After he’d left, Mr. Punch crouched to address them all. He peered into their faces one after the other—Rosie’s, Valian’s, Seb’s and then Ivy’s. “Thank you,” he said simply.

“What happened?” Ivy asked him. “The army burst through the gates; we couldn’t see you—”

“I got trapped inside Lundinor during the fighting,” he explained. “If it hadn’t been for your quick thinking, the Dirge would have won.” He bowed his head in respect. “Uncommoners everywhere are in your debt.” From behind his back he brought out Amos Stirling’s journal. Ivy noticed the pages were badly water-stained and crinkled, and she assumed the damage had occurred on top of Breath Falls.

“This was just recovered from Octavius Wrench,” Mr. Punch said. “I wanted to return it to its rightful guardian.”

“Me?” Ivy replied as Mr. Punch handed the notebook over. “Surely it would be safer if *you* kept hold of it from now on?”

He gave her a kind smile. “There is no secret among those pages greater than the one you have just protected. Because of your actions, the entire uncommon world remains hidden. I doubt there is anyone better qualified to watch over Amos’s journal than you.”

Ivy mumbled a bashful “thank you” as she slipped the journal back into her satchel. She looked at the old lady Mr. Rife was looking after. “Will commoners ever learn the truth about us, do you think?”

“Not all secrets can remain hidden,” Mr. Punch pronounced, glancing at Rosie and Valian. “Maybe one day commoners will learn who we are, but until then we must continue to protect them from the dangers of our world and the dangerous people in it….” He gestured toward Ivy’s satchel. “Amos spent his life trying to do that. Perhaps, in time, you’ll continue from where he left off.”

EPILOGUE

As Ivy placed her hand on the door knocker, she heard the *thud* of feet, and the door swung open.

"You're here!" Judy laughed as she ushered Ivy and Seb inside Hoff & Winkle's Hobsmatch Emporium. It was the winter trading season in Lundinor, and in fitting with the style of all the other shops, Hoff & Winkle's was situated on the ground floor of a rickety old Victorian house with a crooked black roof and dusty leaded windows.

"Sorry we couldn't come sooner," Ivy said with a smile. "We had school."

Judy was wearing faded jeans, a cropped leather jacket and one of Seb's long gray Ripz T-shirts. Now that they were dating, Judy occasionally borrowed his clothes.

In the hallway they bumped into Mr. Rife, hanging his cape over a hook on the wall. He was holding a bunch of pale lilac flowers. "These are for the birthday girl. Sky-blue sun orchids, all the way from Tasmania. I picked them myself."

"You're traveling again?" Ivy asked. Sasspirits like Mr. Rife, she'd learned, healed very slowly. After the injuries he'd sustained during the Thanksgiving Battle, she hadn't been sure he'd be able to operate his uncommon pram so soon by himself.

"Yes, I can't abide staying in one place for too long," he admitted. "Anyway, there's a new skymart opening in the Canadian Rockies next month, and Fred Farrow has been invited along for a preview. I can't miss it."

They crossed the shop floor, which was flanked by clothes racks stocked with everything from ball gowns to hazmat suits, and entered a small, sparsely furnished living room. The air smelled of vanilla and icing sugar.

"Valian's been baking," Judy whispered, "and decorating." Brightly colored bunting hung from the ceiling. Each pennant was printed with a different letter or number so that, all together, they read HAPPY 7TH, 8TH, 9TH, 10TH, 11TH, 12TH AND 13TH BIRTHDAYS, ROSIE! Ivy spotted the greeting cards she and Seb had sent propped up along with several others on the windowsill. A heap of torn wrapping paper lay in the middle of the floor, evidence of where Rosie had been opening some of her presents. On the mantelpiece over the fireplace was the Frozen Telescope of the North, gleaming like a Christmas bauble.

Rosie stood by the table in the adjoining dining room, snacking on mini sausage rolls. Her Hobsmatch—which Ivy had grown accustomed to over the past few weeks—combined a brightly colored flower-print dress with a tasseled brown suede jacket and an old green army helmet, which was far too big for her. “You made it!” She rushed over to give them all a hug. “Valian said it might be difficult for you to get here.”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Seb said. “Happy birthday!” He handed her a glittery gift bag stuffed full of presents. Beneath the wrapping paper were a selection of common items that had caught Rosie’s interest after Ivy and Seb had spoken about them—wash-out hair mascara, six mini Bakewell tarts, a sheet of edible paper, a jewelry-making kit, the DVD boxed set of *Star Wars* and a packet of extra-strong mints.

Scratch vibrated in Ivy’s pocket. “Happying of the birthdays!” he cried as she brought him out and placed him on the table.

Rosie giggled. “Thanks, Scratch.”

Ivy wondered if the next birthday party they all attended would be Scratch’s. After much thought he’d decided that it would be brilliant fun to be a human boy again, but he was happy to wait his turn to use the Sands of Change. The Tidemongers were using the necklace to help those of the dead who were far more desperate than Scratch was, and, in any case, Ivy still needed to organize where Scratch would live when he became human again. He wouldn’t be able to fit in her pocket anymore.

Valian peeped his head through the kitchen doorway. His dark brown hair was neatly combed and parted on one side; he’d replaced his usual leather jacket with a smarter cotton version. “Good,” he said, “everyone’s here. Judy—can you do the honors?”

Judy reached for the switch and dimmed the lights as Valian brought a cake through from the kitchen. It was designed like a world map, with green and blue royal icing. Little models of Rosie in different Hobsmatch outfits stood on each of the seven continents; a small gold candle burned on top.

“It’s amazing!” Rosie squealed, taking a seat at the head of the table. “All the places Mr. Rife and I went to on our travels—” She signaled to the Frozen Telescope on the mantelpiece and added, “I’ve been learning all about our adventures.”

Everyone gathered around her. In the candlelight, Ivy scanned their faces. Mr. Rife looked tired but happy. Judy and Seb were laughing. Valian locked eyes with Ivy, clamping his lips together as though he was trying to stop himself from bursting with joy. She wondered whether he had ever dared, during the last seven years, to dream about a moment like this—with Rosie back in his life, the Dirge gone, and his friends all around.

“All right, everyone!” he called. “ ‘Happy Birthday,’ after three. One… two…”

There was a communal inhaling of breath.

“…three!”

And then the group began to sing. It was disjointed and out of tune, but full of vigor. Rosie grinned and rocked her head from side to side in time with the melody; her army helmet wobbled. A murmur fluttered into Ivy's ear, the voice of a broken soul. It stood out from all the others in the room because it was singing "Happy Birthday" with them. She scanned the dining room carefully and tensed as she realized what it was. "Rosie, wait! The candle—"

Her warning came too late: Rosie puffed her cheeks and blew. The flame flickered and died, leaving behind minute glowing embers. Judy turned the lights up and everyone clapped. Ivy hurried around the table, surprised that Rosie was still visible. "That candle was uncommon," she said. "How can I still see you?" She knew that extinguishing the flame of an uncommon candle turned you invisible—she'd used one before.

"That wasn't just any old candle," Valian explained, leaning closer. "It was a birthday candle. They have an additional uncommon power…they grant small wishes. Our parents always gave us one every birthday when we were little." He stared at Rosie. "What did you wish for?"

She wound a strand of blond hair around her finger. "I just wished for a birthday like this every year, with all of you here."

"Well, I don't see why that won't come true," Mr. Rife commented. "I'll certainly travel back from wherever I am to celebrate with you."

"Us too," Ivy said. "We're a family now…we're uncommoners."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Londoner Jennifer Bell began working in children's books as a specialist bookseller at Foyles—one of the world's most famous bookshops—in Charing Cross Road. There she looked after the shop's five not-so-deadly piranha fish as well as recommending children's books to celebrities, royalty, and even astronauts. After having the privilege of listening to children talk about their favorite books for many years, she started writing a book of her own. Jennifer came up with the idea of *The Crooked Sixpence* while packing for a holiday and wishing she could just disappear inside her suitcase and be there already. The world of Lundinor is inspired by sayings from traditional English nursery rhymes as well as the stories Jennifer grew up with about the cockney markets her grandparents used to visit.

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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Karl James Mountford was born in Germany and brought up around the UK. He now lives in Wales, where his sketchbooks rarely get a day off. Karl works in both traditional and digital mediums to create his illustrative work. He graduated with a master's degree in illustration and visual communication from Swansea College of Art.

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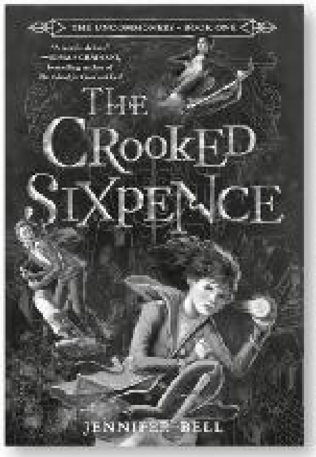
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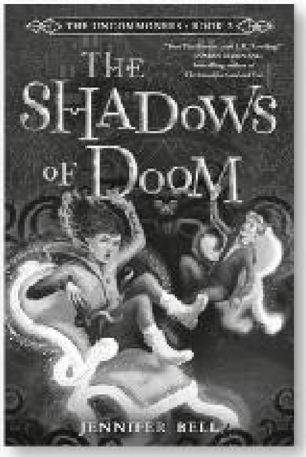
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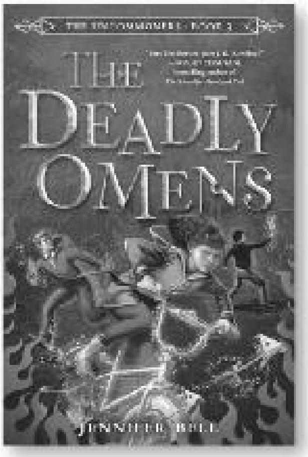
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